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What is This?
Eric Wolf’s Ethical-political Humanism, and Beyond

Josiah McC. Heyman

Abstract This article reviews the references to humanity and humanism in Eric R. Wolf’s work. These words have particular rhetorical weight in his books, indicating that they convey his ethical-political perspective. Yet Wolf’s own emphasis on history, context, power and transformation present challenges to a broad-brush humanism, as do writings of other social theorists. The article considers those criticisms, exploring replies to them derived from Wolf’s work. This textual, intellectual work speaks to contemporary anthropology, which openly considers ethical-political perspectives (e.g. militant and engaged anthropologies) and in which ‘humanism’ is increasingly being advocated as a central value. Ethical-political humanism is proposed to be a framework for combined scientific and normative discussion, in which values of individual, collectivity (cultures), and shared commonality come into play.

Keywords engaged anthropology ■ humanism ■ social morality ■ Eric R. Wolf

Eric Wolf was humane, as humane a person as I have known. This quality also pervades his work. On numerous but widely scattered occasions, he refers to human possibility, human experience, and, famously, to the ‘party of humanity’ (Wolf, 1969: 302). His hints at humanism should not be overstated, but neither are they simple turns of phrase, devoid of implication and significance. Their placement in his work indicates that they bear weight as markers of his moral hopes. Yet his thinking on power and history makes such a vision more difficult. It casts doubt on a unitary conceptualization of ‘humanity’ with shared characteristics and shared fates. Michel Foucault and other social critics also provide important criticisms of humanism, in responding to which Wolf’s ideas are germane. Debates about humanism are central to anthropology, a discipline that understands itself as the study of humankind, one that exists partly in the intellectual humanities (see Rapport and Overing, 2000), and which is today exploring ethical-political humanism.

‘Ethical-political’ is a term I draw from the philosopher Richard J. Bernstein (1991) to characterize the intersection between the quest for knowledge and public moral questions. Ethical-political humanism stands on an intellectual leg, conceiving of people as a unified field of study giving rise to generalizations about human life, and a normative one, evaluating and advocating change in social arrangements on the basis of arguments as to what human life is and might be (e.g. Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).
Although Wolf is famous for his phrase characterizing the intellectual style of anthropology as ‘the most scientific of humanities, the most humanistic of sciences’, the phrase that comes directly before is for our purposes even more telling: ‘anthropology is a manner of looking at man and a vision of man’ (1974 [1964]: 88). It requires careful scrutiny of what is but also demands imagination of what could be.

In recent years, anthropology has witnessed vital debates over whether it should participate in such moral discussions or remain purely ‘scientific’ (D’Andrade, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1995). Several major anthropological thinkers use the terms ‘humanity’ and ‘humanism’ as a path forward from these debates (Hart, 2001; Rappaport, 1999), but do not define them. Lila Abu-Lughod (1993) puts forth ‘tactical humanism’ as a way of countering reified ideas of people as collective kinds or cultures, but she handles it cautiously, as if humanism might be picked up for this one use but otherwise distrusted as an ethical-political framework. Humanism may or may not prove satisfactory, but we need more thorough arguments for and against it. Ethical-political humanism, from an anthropological perspective especially, indicates a commitment to all people, in all places and times, perhaps expressed within but not just limited to specific societies and cultures. This commitment is both intellectual and moral.

We usually acknowledge the intellectual side of anthropological humanism, that we study the Trobriands or Tepoztlán not for their own sakes but as part of the human story. But such transcendent humanism has profound moral implications as well. We understand that people are social, relational and cultural beings, not isolated rights-bearing individuals, but ethical-political humanism does not value collectivities per se. In fact, it opens space to criticize them. This is most apparent when we look at how moral value adheres to people. In actually existing and inevitably flawed social arrangements, people are valued as achievers of wealth, descendants of the sun or true males, and devalued as inadequate workers, outcasts or bearers of children. By envisioning people as humans, an overarching moral category, we view all people (whatever their standing or role) as having equal moral standing. This gains us the analytical and normative space to study and evaluate particular collective arrangements according to how they cultivate and sustain the people within them – whether their treatment is consistent with their overall moral standing. Anthropological humanism, then, offers a framework for discussion – not a single, fundamental answer to what is good or right – a discussion that moves constantly between three levels: individuals, total humanity and collective social life. It is a discussion that encourages moral reasoning, indeed moral emotion and imagination, but demands of its participants close adherence to the quest for knowledge and its results.

Harkening back to Wolf’s evocative words ‘manner of looking’ and ‘vision’, we note that they occur near the end of Anthropology (1974 [1964]). This placement is vital to the rhetoric of his books. The radical inspiration
of the ‘party of humanity’ passage, discussed below, forms the climax of *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969). *Europe and the People without History* at the end speaks of the ‘common destiny’ of the people with privileged pasts and those without them (1982: 391). Even the deeply pessimistic *Envisioning Power* closes with a powerful normative message: ‘At this millennial transition, the human capacity to envision imaginary worlds seems to be shifting into high gear. For anthropologists and others, greater concern with how ideas and power converge seems eminently warranted’ (1999: 291). In each case, Wolf underlines a message by putting it at the end of a book, where it signals a transition from the relatively objective labors of the preceding pages to a final ethical-political vision. Coming at the finale, it signals culmination and then transcendence, which heighten the moral inspiration of the book as a whole.

Still, Wolf only hinted at his ethical-political concerns in short passages and did not develop them at length. To find out more, we must plunge into the details of his theoretical work, beginning with *Anthropology* (1974 [1964]). This essay-like book, though dated in its references and debates, put forth a fundamental program that he would follow for the rest of his career. He tells us first about American anthropology before the Second World War, when the Boasians studied in a rigorous but also romantic fashion the seemingly endless range of human creativity and variation. The post-war (and, though he does not say it, Cold War) period brought a harsher view of the human condition, one that emphasized determinations and constraints: ‘the attempt to define some underlying reality beneath the ever changing surface of human phenomena, to delineate the common psychobiological structure of man, to specify the common blueprint of the human animal’ (1974 [1964]: 33). This characterizes much work on ‘human nature’ even to the present. But Wolf lays out a plan to go beyond this dichotomy without abandoning the understandings gained within it. He does this in a chapter titled ‘The Transformation of Culture’ (1974 [1964]: Ch. 3). In introducing it, he accepts both human design and pliable culture but emphasizes culture’s interconnected, historical and (in this book, implicitly) power-relational qualities. In so doing, he raises to an abstract level the encompassing, transformational approach he took to Mesoamerican studies in *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (1959).

Wolf’s sequence of topics in *Anthropology* (various cultures exist, cultures elaborate on underlying human design, cultures are constantly in processes of rearrangement) merits two comments. First, Wolf builds his own position (the third one) on the foundation of previous approaches rather than seeking to defeat and dismiss them. His agenda of studying cultural transformation requires a Boasian sense that culture exists in the first place, as Lars Rodseth points out in this issue, while the Boasian ‘mediation of culture’, as Wolf puts it, rests on the ‘human design’ (1974 [1964]: 53). His view of anthropology, then, is catholic and encompassing, even if he took his immediate task to be reminding anthropologists about history,
power and inequality. Second, we should notice his choice of the term ‘transformation’. Wolf was famously historical in his anthropology, but the idea of transformation goes beyond complex historical sequence, to emphasize the major arrangements and rearrangements of human affairs and their importance for understanding life within them. Transformation is not a moral term per se, but it opens the doors to our considering major alternatives to the status quo, in both past and present. It is an invitation to the anthropological imagination.

In *Europe and the People without History*, in particular in the chapter on modes of production (1982: Ch. 3), Wolf elaborated on the vision in *Anthropology*. In doing so, he came closer than in any other piece of his work to his specific notions of human design. His approach is, of course, broadly Marxian, with distinct anthropological components. Labor is central, involving transformations of nature carried out by people mobilized by social relationships. Each of the three modes has distinct ways of mobilizing labor, but here I focus on a similarity among them, the crucial role of polarized relationships: ‘kinsman, serf, slave, or wage laborer . . . elder kinsman, chief, seignorial lord, capitalist’ (1982: 74) is a characteristic list from Wolf. My suggestion is that he viewed people as always unequally relational. If there is a primeval human stuff, it invariably differentiates into relational pairs or more complex networks of relations that stand in opposed and imbalanced combination. Furthermore, these relational pairs are not differences of fundamental kinds, but ones that divide equivalent human beings into apparent ‘kinds’ through symbolic distinctions; hence, they can be transformed into other relationships by alternative symbolic arrangements.

Wolf’s approach is notable in the debates over human nature and humanity in two regards. First, the three modes of production point to a comparative and generalizing enterprise, one that admits foundations and experience-distant conceptualizations, although he demands of comparative anthropology that it compare situations within an interconnected historical stream rather than juxtapose decontextualized cases. More importantly, the very concept of people as relational and transformational demands a sense of complexity in the study of human design. Human beings always have at least two possibilities, ones that can only be expressed in combination with other, inverse possibilities. This inherently contextual and changeable view of human nature differs significantly from that of many current writers on the subject, who search for knowledge of humanity in definite, singular characteristics (e.g. Pinker, 2002). They lack the analytical tools to explore interactive and emergent human phenomena except as low-context examples of some invariant or simply inflected tendency (but there are exceptions, e.g. Boyd and Richerson, 1985; Durham, 1991, and others).1 This quality of Wolf’s framework enables him to embrace and synthesize great complexity and transformability without losing sight of broad patterns, commonalities and shared fates.
For all my arguments about Wolf’s encompassing humanism, however, there is no question that important qualities of his work – the profound emphasis on history, the themes of specificity, context and transformation, and so on – present serious challenges to ethical-political stances centered on humanity as a whole. For example, *Europe and the People without History* demolishes the anthropological habit of taking small-scale, non-western (‘primitive’) cultures out of historical context as privileged windows on the human condition (e.g. Kluckhohn, 1949). If we are to reconstruct this enterprise, comparative anthropology as a path toward understanding humanity as a whole, we must pass much more carefully through a phase of contextualizing in time and space our specific examples. Furthermore, Wolf demonstrates that ways of being human are developed in the interplay of powers and ambitions, and resistances and avoidances of them. Although a power-saturated view of cultural construction does not disallow the intellectual and moral enterprise of trying to understand humanity as a whole (Heyman, 2003), in practice it raises serious barriers. Particular moralities, practices and relations are the sediment, over time, of power projects and struggles for and against them. Power projects often raise a contingent way of being human into an apparent necessary way of being human, so that much work consists of demystification of claimed human universals. To generalize from them, one needs to distinguish the contingent and coercive or unequal elements from the potentially fulfilling and humane ones. Conceptually, one can draw such lines, but in reality the two sides infuse each other.

A prominent element in Wolf’s work is his situating cultures in the expansion of European-based capitalism. This would seem to constrain ethical-political as well as intellectual inquiries to a specific time period and social context, so that in normative dialogue we would speak only about the qualities of recent capitalism for people, rather than a wider variety of social arrangements. This historical narrowing is not an adequate reading of his work, however. As we have seen, *Envisioning Power* has an explicitly cautionary agenda. The question is, is it only a caution about modern power and the effects of capitalism? The book has three major studies: the Kwakiutl, Aztecs and Nazis. In part, this selection speaks to the anthropological tradition: no matter how revolutionary Wolf’s agenda, his work addresses long established cases like the Kwakiutl. But there is more to this design yet. The Kwakiutl study harkens back to *Europe and the People without History*, in which the cultural efflorescence and crisis of power occurred in contexts of the fur trade and wage labor, demographic decline with settlement centralization, missionization, and so on. The Nazi case, in turn, occurs within the heart of European capitalism and modernism. But the Aztec chapter focuses almost entirely on central Mexican developments before the arrival of the Spanish, even if some evidence comes from post-conquest sources. By juxtaposing these three cases, Wolf establishes a regularity in how elites stoke and respond to crises through dramatic ideological...
elaborations and inventions. This pattern includes but goes beyond the capitalist world system, modernity, etc. In presenting and analyzing each instance, he maintains his strictures about attending to context and connection, but the book makes a strong statement in favor of cross-contextual comparison. And drawing out the ethical-political lessons of this comparison, he explicitly uses the transcendent stance of humanism. The three cases are ‘view[s] of human possibility’ (Wolf, 1999: 134), and the Nazis ‘embodied a possibility for humankind’ about which we should be aware since ‘what was once humanly possible can happen again’ (1999: 197). Let us note this term ‘possibility’, and come back to it shortly.

For the moment, however, we turn to another implication of Envisioning Power’s design. The introduction is a magnificent essay in the history of ideas, putting culture, ideology, power, etc. in their historical contexts in class and state formations in Europe. Grounded as such ideas may be, Wolf clearly intends them to do historically far-ranging work, such as understanding Aztec state mythology and ritual. This contrasts with the approach of Michel Foucault, in which social forms exist through the ideas that envision them, and ideas (‘knowledges’) are held in and bound to delimited times. If humanity can be shown to be a historically-based idea, as it undoubtedly is, then the would-be category of humanness as such is appropriately limited to a specific context (Foucault, 1970), as are other ideas like culture, ideology, power, etc. Wolf, on the other hand, takes concepts grounded in modernism but treats them as transportable across time and space. Although he does this for culture and ideology rather than humanity, the point remains the same: a transcendent ethical-political humanism rests on a Wolfian rather than a Foucauldian approach to the role of historically-grounded knowledge.

As this discussion shows, Wolf’s thinking resonates with recent critics of humanism. Still, it seems worthwhile pointing out how certain of Wolf’s statements temper the most stringent anti-humanist criticisms, even though his work rests on related concerns. For example, recent social theorists and ethnographers have questioned the humanist assumption that people are unitary individual subjects, intellectually and morally. On the one extreme, deconstructionists (e.g. Derrida, 1978) question the coherence of conscious intention, and thus the unity of the discrete individual. Largely independently, many anthropologists (e.g. White and Kirkpatrick, 1985) question the projection of a European model of personhood onto other, more relational cultural-psychologies. On the other extreme, radical social scientists and activists increasingly speak of collective rather than individual moral actors. A critical instance for anthropology is the question of group cultural and political rights (Messer, 1993). My reply, drawing on Wolf, does not deny the complexity of individual subjectivity and agency, nor the urgent ethical-political questions surrounding collective rights that might enable individuals to thrive, but it resists the erosion of individual moral personhood in the face of collective forms of power.
Wolf in *Anthropology* discusses segmentation of people in the social sciences, at the end drawing out the ethical-political implications of these ideas:

[W]e have asserted that what is worth studying is human experience; not economic experience, not psychological experience, not religious experience, cut into segments and studied separately, but human experience understood as the experience of life. This I believe to be an assertion of freedom against slavery. For each segmentary model of man is also a straitjacket for men. (Wolf, 1974 [1964]: 96)

Contemporary capitalism strives for the systematic management of work and desire (and knowledge, time and all other ‘human factors’ that enter into those two terms) to optimize production and consumption. There is, hence, critical moral insight in Wolf’s advocacy of the unified human individual. It suggests we be cautious about emphases that either merge individuals as palpable manifestations of collective agendas or that obviate the existence of ‘the subject’ and hence of the moral subject altogether. There is likewise insight, however, in the critical reading of individualist ideologies (those seeing people as unrelated and free-standing actors); we know well the role of such notions in obscuring collective inequities and in placing the blame on the volition of the individual. Perhaps some resolution comes from acknowledging different moments in the analytical-moral process: we value the well-being of individuals, while recognizing in its pursuit various collective qualities of social injustice and social justice-seeking.

A related criticism of humanism is that it covertly endorses power. Foucault, in *The Order of Things* (1970) and various other of his writings, takes on the projection of a unified image of humankind, arrived at deductively, that philosophers call an ‘anthropology’, which characterized the Enlightenment and the early social sciences. This philosophical anthropology involves the designation of one singular human subjectivity and the erasure of alternative subjectivities. Though Foucault’s explicit concern with power postdates *The Order of Things*, he sees the discursive invention of ‘the human’ as making possible ‘truths’ in its study and practice, thus authorizing the penetration of people through the so-called human sciences, part of an ample panoply of modern subjugating forces. Feminists have offered a related criticism, that Enlightenment ideas of ‘human nature’ have privileged dominant experiences: men, Europeans, the wealthy and educated, and so forth (see Ferguson, 1993; Nicholson, 1993). It is no accident that an earlier anthropology phrased its intellectual humanism in terms of ‘man’. The point is more than that notions of humanity are empirically limited and flawed – though that concern is not to be neglected – it is that the postulate of ‘humanity’ hides particularistic domination in claims of universality.

At the close of *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, Wolf speaks of
peasants as partaking of the ‘party of humanity’. Why this curious phrasing; why peasants, who even in view of their partisans possess a notably violent and fractious politics? At the start of the passage in which this quote is found (1969: 301–2), Wolf had seen the ‘peasant [as] an agent of forces larger than himself’ and had pointed out that Mexican, Russian, Chinese and other peasants fought in revolutionary wars won by non-peasant men of statist vision, who in turn implemented policies that disrupted, even harmed, the peasants themselves. Thus, he writes, ‘the peasant’s role is essentially tragic: his efforts to undo a grievous present only usher in a vaster, more uncertain future’. He delineates developments that he sees as hopeful, such as ‘a solution of the age-old problem of hunger and disease’ and ‘ancient monopolies of power and received wisdom . . . yielding to human effort to widen participation and knowledge’. Insofar as peasants partake of such hopes, then, their efforts are not just tragic but, ‘to that extent theirs is the party of humanity’. Their modern opponents are not just the ‘defenders of ancient privileges’ but the ‘new engineers of power’ who would deny such hopes to both peasantry and themselves (1969: 301–2).

Wolf’s peasants, then, project a philosophical anthropology of humanity as opposition rather than domination. They contrast not only with the older power order, but also the new engineers (or perhaps structurally adjusting economists). They draw on the quality of backward-looking grievances over injustice, which is particularistic rather than humanistic, but also look toward the horizon of hope, which in Wolf’s thought embodies the ‘human’ as shared possibility rather than authorization of some and erasure of others. If some claims to humanism privilege those above, the choice of peasants draws our attention to those humanisms rising from below. Humanism thus is not a singular ethical-political solution. It provokes debates over partisan visions of the ‘human’. Hence, it is not so vulnerable to dismissal as The Order of Things implies: not all philosophical anthropologies of humanity entail the glorification of the powerful and the intellectual; delineating the humanity of the peasant, the outsider generally, is an empathetic stance from which to criticize the status quo. Of course, this only begins our ethical-political work: we require an ample vision of human thriving from which to point out its violation and absence. But, as a visionary and energizing phrase, the ‘party of humanity’ is a fine start.

The ‘party of humanity’ phrase from the Vietnam War era finds echoes in today’s ‘militant anthropology’ (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, 1995). Such radical stances see society as composed of differentiating relationships, often unequal in power and quality of life and involving conflict and hegemony. Wolf’s Marxian modes of production partake of such perspectives. This view contrasts with notions of society as essentially uniform and cohesive, and characterized by shared interests and genuine consensus. Leaving aside arm’s-length intellectual versions of radical theories, the
explicitly normative versions involve evaluating social arrangements from the perspective of the ‘underdog’, the less powerful, the poorer, the more oppressed. The view from below shapes whether and how one sees the causes of human suffering and the paths toward transformation. But phrasing the underdog perspective in terms of the experience of the oppressed presenting a critique of the oppressors, because the former live and are treated below specific human standards, differs importantly from advocating the claims of oppressed people as superior to those they oppose, whether oppressors or oppressed people of other kinds. The notion of a party of humanity thus establishes an inclusive moral domain rather than an exclusive one, which may differ significantly from an anthropology of unmediated or unreflective advocacy (also see Bornstein, 2001).

Wolf’s ethical-political humanism thus offers us possibilities, not certainties. Recent decades have witnessed debates over ‘human nature’ that pose rigid determinism against a social constructionism marked by the assumption of near infinite flexibility and reflex hostility to category and essence (see note 1). Derek Freeman’s attack on Margaret Mead epitomizes this fruitless polarization (Freeman, 1983; Mead, 1961 [1928]; see also Foerstel and Gilliam, 1992; Holmes, 1987). As historians of science have shown, determinisms disguise ethical-political assumptions in putatively certain scientific knowledge (Haraway, 1989). Constructionism also hides ethical-political agendas; much work that tears apart ‘essentialisms’ does so, not in the service of pure relativism (which seems the logical consequence of constructionism), but in favor of one side or normative stance (Scheper-Hughes’ work, cited above, has the virtue of being explicit about this). Wolf presents to us in his historical-comparative work a different, and perhaps more liberating framework for normative debate: not determinism versus constructionism, but possibility versus possibility. The word ‘possibility’ induces us to look through the human record, with its remarkable complexity and variability, to ascertain the range and consequences of alternative relationships and arrangements, an approach that resembles constructionism in its flexibility but is not inclined toward its tearing apart and tearing down of the empirical record. Furthermore, phrasing our quest as conversations about ‘possibilities’ emphasizes the ethical-political choices we face, since possibilities are neither necessities excusing us from responsibility nor complete freedoms to do as we choose.

The notion of possibility may seem vapid and excessively open to interpretation. I hold, however, that it simply creates a grounded debate, in which we talk openly of values when looking at the range of empirically understood human cases. John Bodley’s Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems (2001), though at times heavy-handed and mechanical, exemplifies the value of this approach. He compares three basic political-economic-ecological arrangements: domestic-, political- and commercial-scale cultures. The first type combines various tribal peoples and local populations encysted in larger polities, the second refers to pre-industrial
class societies, and the third to the capitalist world-system. He then argues that domestic scale cultures surpass the other two types in important features of life, including lessened resource depletion and pollution, lower levels of organized violence, and a more secure and egalitarian daily existence. Furthermore, he contends, there are significant lessons for surviving and thriving in the contemporary world that we can learn from the anthropological record. Bodley’s book is significant because it is an undergraduate text, not a recondite work of theory; it aspires to open the vital debate over human possibilities to a wide audience. Wolf was not a popularizer, though he wrote clearly and beautifully, but he demonstrated a genuine commitment to the struggle over human possibilities, ranging from his stunning intellectual syntheses to his seminal role in the teach-in movement against the Vietnam War.

The chief virtue of ethical-political humanism, then, is that it does not give us certainties of the kind that excuse us from genuine moral effort but demands of us precisely the Wolfian combination of moral and intellectual labor in the world. It takes people as the ultimate criteria for studying and evaluating social and cultural orders, rather than falling in love with those orders themselves. It establishes a highly inclusive and equal criterion of moral standing, bringing together gay and straight, male and female, rich and poor. In its anthropological version, it is complex, holistic and integrative in its vision of human qualities, valuing both material and symbolic lives, combining, in Nancy Fraser’s (1997) terms, ‘redistribution and recognition’ as radical ideals. Of course, this is not to say that it is simple, obvious or definitive; it offers not a foundation but a framework for study and debate. For example, I am now exploring the interplay between the criticism of actually existing social arrangements, the deconstruction of power which is fundamental to Wolf’s work and the work of many other radical scholars, and the implied ideals against which we compare power orders, including the use of imagination grounded in anthropological learning to discuss possible better human lives (Heyman, 2003). But this is just one small effort among many inspired by the vision and example of Eric Wolf.

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Notes

1 There are at least two streams of recent writing on genes and cultures, one emphasizing complex interactions of genes and cultures over human history (gene–culture coevolution) and the other (evolutionary psychology) emphasizing definite, singular psychological predispositions and tendencies that evolved in a distinct past period in human history. Obviously, I can comment on this only as an outsider interested in its implications for ethical-political humanism; a useful entry-point into the debates from both sides can be found in Erlich and Feldman (2003) and the Current Anthropology commentaries that follow.

2 As the quote from Wolf and my gloss on it suggest, not all collectivist invasions of individual experience are the fault of radical state regimes, such as communist ones. Because individual versus collective is often perceived to be limited to the capitalist (individualist) versus anti-capitalist (collectivist) axis, political debate on both sides of the issue (individual, collective) has obscured the massive invasion of the individual in capitalist private and public regimes. The approach I outline here does not undertake a strict libertarianism (which is unviable in light of the social and cultural sciences), but is supportive of the individual moral subject against collectivism and segmentation of many political stripes.

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