History as Commodity: In Some Recent American (Anthropological) Literature

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HISTORY AS COMMODITY
IN SOME RECENT AMERICAN (ANTHROPOLOGICAL)
LITERATURE*

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There are no facts as such. We must always begin by introducing a meaning in order for there to be a fact.

—Nietzsche, quoted in R. Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History’

Sundering truth from falsehood is the goal of the materialist method, not its point of departure. In other words, its point of departure is the object riddled with error, with conjecture. The distinctions with which the materialist method, discriminative from the outset, starts are distinctions within this highly mixed object, and it cannot present this object as mixed or uncritical enough.


GUIDE BOOKS
Two highly polished books about commodities have recently been launched onto the U.S. market. The results of lifetimes of thought, both seize on the commodity in the belief or the hope that the firmer they grasp it, the more likely they are to shake us free of the illusions we have about explaining society. Preeminently they are guide books for American Anthropology, which they wish to save from various fates—a descent into triviality, losing sense of purpose. It’s as if Anthropology, once an item in a dull university catalog, had like the commodity itself risen from mere thinghood to acquire life and soul, albeit sickly and deformed and in need of saving.

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Studies of the everyday in modern life, of the changing character of mundane matters like food, viewed from the joined perspective of production and consumption, use and function, and concerned with the differential emergence and variation of meaning, may be one way to inspirit a discipline now dangerously close to losing its sense of purpose (Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p.213).

In 1968 I wrote that anthropology needed to discover history, a history that could account for the ways in which the social system of the modern world came into being, and that would strive to make analytic sense of all societies, including our own [because] our methods were becoming more sophisticated but their yield seemed increasingly commonplace. To stem a descent into triviality, I thought we needed to search out the causes of the present in the past. Only in this way could we come to comprehend the forces that impel societies and cultures here and now. This book grew out of these convictions (Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, p.ix).

**LIFESAVERS**

I have been thrown two life jackets, one to inspire, the other to stem descent, yet I fear the sea is too cold and choppy to use them, much as I might want to. Like Kafka I'm sure there's hope, but I'm not sure if it's for us. This is the sea of commodities, vast and treacherous. Most of the time the best one can do is tread water. Kafka said he suffered from seasickness on dry land, but the builders of these life jackets don't have much time for that sort of talk, and I suppose that befits the grim purpose of saving lives. Not for them the resort to play or trickery, the slow digesting of experience(s), the place of dream in the commodity as utopian wishing, emotions, interpretation, and all that goes along with observing oneself observing. Yet sometimes I think the designers of these jackets do not realize quite how serious our situation is, how the sea surrounds us on all sides, commodities determining the very way we try to size up things, objectify and subjectify the world and in doing so create colliding realities, how the horizon wavers, advances and recedes, making us giddy as the currents from the deep pull and tear us in all directions. More mysterious than table-turning, Marx said in his famous chapter on the fetishism of commodities and its secret—therewith bringing to a close that massive first step of an introduction to *Capital* concerned not merely with the vexing question of value but with *problematizing the commodity-form itself*. Marx was not happy with the solid, open-faced appearance that commodities acquired as things, complete unto themselves. And with what fiendish delight did he point to the dazzling epistemological somersaults undertaken by commodities and upon ourselves, first as things, then as spirits. Fetishism was the term he used and we, in a post-Frankfurt/Adorno/Benjamin age, are now
somewhat accustomed not only to attempts to work through the effects of the coupling and decoupling of reification with fetishization but also to the shocking conclusions that Adorno, for one, drew; namely, that this somersaulting, this coupling and decoupling, constituted the basis of capitalist culture as well as the insuperable block to the Kantian antinomies. There could be no solution inside philosophy to the epistemological problems posed by our type of economy. Ours was the age of contradiction par excellence, an age of fragmentation and incoherence in which (according to the Communist Manifesto and Marshall Berman) 'all that is sold melts into air.' Georg Lukács, in a classic paper on reification, opined in the mid-1920s that at this stage of capitalism there was no problem that did not lead back to the question of the commodity-form, the central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. The basis of this commodity-form, he wrote, 'is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a “phantom objectivity,” an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature; the relation between people.' Exceedingly strange, therefore, that our two commodity authors should be attempting to save us without so much as a nod to Marx for his warnings about the commodity's two-facedness and double-dealing—especially when we consider the dependence on him they manifest throughout their work. On looking over their books one is tempted to conclude that works which cannot trade blow for blow with the commodity as thing and the commodity as fetish are destined to reproduce the very phantom objectivity Lukács pointed to. And they do this not only in the name of critique, but to save us.

**TITLES**

There is Sidney Mintz’s book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, and Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History*. Both titles have something to tell us. Professor Mintz’s is congenial in assuring me that there is an entity, Modern History, with places in it for commodities like shelving in the supermarket. Our task is to find where the sugar is kept, and in search of it, we learn much about the whole. As a guide, Mintz is charming and modest. His text depends much on the subjunctive mood, a lot of perhaps and maybe, a nudge here and there, every now and then a grand slam where bits are smooshed together to the benefit of capital and power. In short it is a text, a poetics, of sweetness and power. As such it is to be sharply distinguished from the poetics of Wolf’s commodity-book, which proceeds in a straight line through History seen as progressive stages in the unfolding of a Totality. Wolf knows the supermarket so well that all he
has to do is pull a few items off the shelves to illustrate the interlocking connections that constitute aforesaid Totality, and his tone is authoritative. The poetics of sweetness and power takes on added significance when Mintz speaks eloquently of a sense of mystery he found in sugar from the beginning of his Caribbean awakening, a mystery that is largely but not completely put to rest by finding out about and being able to envision as so many internal relations of sugar the trading relations between Europe, Africa, and the sugar islands and land south of Florida; the stupendous importance of sugar in the development of capitalism; the complex puzzle of Demand (as in Supply and Demand); aristocratic luxury taste and lower-class imitating; the possible role of sugar in sweetening and fueling the bitter life of the English laborer; and so forth. But the mystery lingers. No matter how many connections of (what one might chose to call) the historical sort Mintz brings to light, it is we, with our specific conventions, convictions, and curiosity, who provide that light (of intelligibility) — and thereby continue to puzzle about the connections between meaning (sweetness) and power.

Wolf's entitling is, to put it mildly, a study in irony, for the implication is that many or all Third World people have been falsely portrayed (particularly by anthropologists, he will say) as not having History (First Irony). Then there is the Marxist or Marxist-Populist convention by which it is a sign of revolutionary solidarity to affirm the existence of those passive objects of others' History-making, 'people (truly) without history' (Second Irony). Both formulations effortlessly reify History as something to be possessed, and both are subject in his book to a Third or meta-irony by the surprising absence of the Histories of the people without history. It is Wolf's way of looking at History as the History of the Commodity that causes this dehistoricization of History. He takes the materialist or bourgeois meaning of the commodity, not the one that bedevils Marx in the long first section of Capital, with the result that History itself becomes a fetish, a live being with a spirit of its own. This fetish-power Wolf renders as Capital Accumulation. People then become things, truly without History.

MEN MAKE STORIES

'Men make history,' states Wolf in his Afterword, following Marx, 'but not under conditions of their own choosing.' Men (and women) make stories too, and since the Enlightenment they have often called them Histories. The wonder is how such stories, removed from the authority of the lived experience of the story-teller, are constructed so as to seem (in the words of Roland Barthes) to tell themselves. Like the commodity, (hi)story has two modes; in
its thing-form it is something that the (hi)storian can rise above and manipulate; in its fetish-form it is self-empowered and irresistibly real. As commodity, therefore, History is the story that men make and makes men. In this way the Historian humbly finds that privileged position, that Archimedean point, outside of History whereby History in its telling can be evaded. This point outside and above history is the phantom to which the historian striving for objectivity, the phantom objectivity of Lukács, aspires. Both of these books about the commodity and history are phantomized in this way.

**IRRESISTIBLY REAL**

In this type of History ‘everything happens,’ writes Barthes, ‘as if the discourse or the linguistic existence was merely a pure and simple “copy” of another existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the “real.”’

Not so much ‘arguments’ and ‘points’ but first the creation and sustenance of a feeling of the real, out there—this is the major ideological task of the discourse of history, and it involves a mode of representation which denies the act of representing. Raymond Williams writes that language is not merely an instrument but also a source of experience. Yet to the sustenance of the ‘reality-effect’ of historical discourse it is essential that writing be understood as only instrumental—our instrument with which we copy reality out there, reality serene in its independence from its representation. (The reality with which we are not so much concerned as involved, of course, is the one that asks us not about the existence of this table or that tree but about social relationships, social knowledge in both its implicit and its explicit dimensions, labor and labor-power.)

**THE REALITY OF MODERNITY**

Might not commodity fetishism create modes of representation which undo as well as sustain this ‘effect of the real’?

Barthes writes that historical discourse is the only one in which the referent is addressed as external to the discourse, though without its ever being possible to reach it outside this discourse.

This superb and supreme insolubility of the referent, smug in its own thinghood, is of course a phantom, a contrivance that masquerades as self-made in its occupying Lukács’s space of phantom objectivity. Its very phantasmic character, however, beckons us toward modes of representation in which representation itself is represented. These modes are Modernism. And it is their task to link arms with phantoms so as to problematize reference.
They do not openly contest the fetishism of commodities so much as trip them up in their own epistemological murk.

Professor Mintz calls not only for an ‘anthropology of modern life’ and ‘of the changing character of mundane matters like food’, but for an anthropology that retains ‘a full appreciation of humanity’s historical nature as a species’ (p.213). He invokes the modern against the primitive. He sees Primitivism as an essential part of anthropologists’ undoing and castigates Romanticism, that whipping boy of Realists.

Yet is not his very insistence here testimony to the dependence of the modern on Primitivism? What could be more archaic, if not primitive, than the impassioning appeal to humanity’s historical nature as species? And might not the commodity itself, which is what his book is about, be testimony to this precise dependence and conflation of Primitivism and Modernism? Think here of Walter Benjamin’s Passagenwerk, the Paris Arcades Project of the 1930s, with his pointed concern to show us the ways by which the commodity, in its very modernity and mundaneness, conjured up the archaic and the exotic, the primitive and the mythic. It was as if, in our secular and scientific age, fancy found its home no longer in the stories and gods of times gone by but in commodities, as fetishes and as things.¹ A dreamworld lay before us in the mythic meanings of commodities, the promise they held. The primitive was made anew by the new, and it was the child’s fresh eye that brought the always-the-same in the commodity to the adult’s sense of change and ‘progress’ in this age of the modern—this age for which Mintz wants an anthropology. But little of this implosion of the made-up past in the present meets Mintz’s adult eye, despite his poignant call for an anthropology of the modern in the mundane. Like the way both he and Professor Wolf eye the commodity, so modernity is here deproblematized; it is the latest slice in the homogenous flow of time.

**MARLBORO MAN**

In leather and denim he sits, high on his galloping horse, way above the freeway, swinging his lariat yet perfectly relaxed as the cars hum and the semis scream past underneath, their drivers half in and half out of consciousness in that funny semi-awake/semi-dream state of near hypnosis that characterizes not only highway driving but much of modernity as well. And what could be more rationalistic than the freeway, the shortest distance between two points in a straight line, cruise control, every exit numbered. Progress too. He’s high already. Must be fifty feet up there dwarfing us, going too fast to do more than
glimpse him galloping in another century through the grey midwestern summer sky as we approach Detroit or cross the Bay Bridge to Oakland.

**VIScerAL MEANings**

Tobacco: a capital substance, and a mystical one too; a killer and a necessity. It enters not only the freeway of our imagination, as it does for shamans in the Orinoco Delta, but the blood that is our biological life-stream. Its meanings overwhelm us. Up there in the sky with his lariat and with the gods, more alive than you or me, the Marlboro Man. But sugar, where rides its champion? This is a question not so much of “advertising” (a term that instantly makes one switch off one’s politico-aesthetic scanner) but of the mythification of substances in a non-mythifying age of marketing rationality. Why tobacco one way and sugar another? Why should Mintz’s book on the meaning-and-power of sugar in modern history contain next to nothing that can help us? And what happens to ‘meaning’ when it becomes ‘taste’? Might not we call on Mintz, by the material facts of the matter, to create a new field not of power and meaning but of power and... visceral meaning? And what might that be? (With some surprise I note that what people mean by meaning, when they regard it as secondary to something ‘more basic’ like ‘power’ or one or another of les grandes recits, is so terribly staid, so framed, cognitive, and uptight. No place for emotions or visceral meanings here.)

**RITUAL**

The study of ‘consumption’ is essential to Mintz’s mystery of sugar. The commodity passes in its life-circuit from exchange-value to use-value where, anthropologist as he is, Mintz scents the strategic importance of ritual in creating and maintaining sugar’s demand. In doing so he subtly reminds us of some of anthropology’s claim to distinction, what makes it different from other human sciences. He is using anthropology, showing us its power. Yet his doing so weakens its power, for what we get are textbookish clichés about ritual as a crude functionalizer: rituals into which sugar was ‘wedged’ (sic) reproduce social status and social divisions; sugar drifts down the social ladder as it becomes cheaper and more plentiful and drifts down further to be used as a sign of... one is not sure exactly, but it is used in rituals of separation and departure and, of course, the ritual of tea and the tea break in work. But we seem to be sliding, for what a ritual banquet of the ruling class or the ritual of a funeral means is not quite the same as what we mean when we speak of the ritual of a cup of tea in modern times, one of the many ‘rituals’ of everyday life. In fact, we do not say ritual (that’s more a professionalized anthropologi-
cal smirk). What people say are things like (recalling my childhood) ‘a cuppa
tea, a Bex, and a good lie down’—a sigh of pleasure/a cry of pain and muted
protest, associated particularly with or attributed to working-class women in
Sydney (Bex is an across-the-counter analgesic). It is a pity that Mintz never
takes us into one of these rituals of the modern everyday so often named and
hence claimed in the explanation of consumption. But perhaps modernity
would stretch anthropology out of shape.

—We can drink it black, Stephen said. There’s a lemon in the locker.
—O, damn you and your Paris fads, Buck Mulligan said. I want Sandy cove
milk.
Haines came in from the doorway and said quietly:
—That woman is coming up with the milk.
—The blessings of God on you, Buck Mulligan cried, jumping up from his
chair. Sit down. Pour out the tea there. The sugar is in the bag. Here I can’t
go fumbling at the damned eggs. He hacked through the fry on the dish and
slapped it out on three plates saying:
—In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Haines sat down to pour out the
tea.
—I’m giving you two lumps each, he said. But, I say, Mulligan, you do make
strong tea, don’t you?
Buck Mulligan hewing thick slices from the loaf said in an old woman’s
wheedling voice:
—When I makes tea, I makes tea, as old Mother Grogan said. And when I
makes water, I makes water.
—By Jove, it’s tea, Haines said.
Buck Mulligan went on hewing and wheedling:
—So I do, Mrs Cahill, says she. Begob, ma’am, says Mrs Cahill, God send
you don’t make them in the one pot. He lunged towards his messmates in turn
a thick slice of bread, impaled on his knife.
—That’s folk, he said very earnestly, for your book Haines.

An unusual group in some ways only, students in James Joyce’s Dublin, July
16, 1904. Yet this is clearly life surging around the sugary rite, and how its
sense differs from the naming and claiming and functionalizing of the rites of
that what we might call a premodern Anthropology, enmeshed in the fiction
of the real, wishes to recruit for the explanation of demand! How its sudden
swerves of pace and direction, its gathering of angles, imprecisions, and
layers, suggest conflicting realities at work in any instant of Modernity! But where would that leave an anthropology of the modern everyday.

**PRACTICES**

Mintz talks of practices of consumption (p.154) as well as of rituals, and in much the same way. Practices of consumption 'mark the distribution of power' within the organization of society, for example. Comforting words are 'mark' and 'organization,' reassuringly solid for the necessary task of bestowing a sense of coherence on the world. But of 'power,' the wished-for bedrock, there are other views. Michel de Certeau, for example, writes on what he calls the logic of everyday practices and, more pointedly, on the complication posed for the study of such practices by the constant disruption of such logic. In his words, 'these practices themselves alternately exacerbate and disrupt our logics' (note, exacerbate and disrupt). Research into these practices, as much as the practices themselves, contains what he calls 'regrets'—the havoc played on the logic of explanation and of analysis by the play of chance in everyday life-practice, the ineffability of certain experiences constituting those practices, the grayness of the epistemic murk habituating our life-forms. The study of practices in everyday modern life leads, he concludes, to a 'polemological analysis of culture. Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimates, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence [and] the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.'

De Certeau thus sees power as not only entailed in practices of consumption but destabilized as well. This is quite distinct—as writing practice—from what a text like Mintz's achieves. *Sweetness and Power*, in the very earnestness with which it continuously strives to reduce such things as 'practices of consumption' to 'power' as the bedrock, constantly affirms and sustains that power. Just as the commodity is deproblematized, and the Modern too (seen as the latest slice in the flow of homogenous time), so power itself is reified, and critique cast in conventional terms sustains convention.

**SLIPPERINESS AND POWER**

One of the things that amazes me reading a book like this, with its wealth of materials and enormity of scope and drama, is how little it amazes me. There is no estrangement. Not only is this anthropology of the everyay textualized so that the everyday remains everyday, but the sense of slipperiness of power, what de Certeau conveys, is anathema to it. Instead the text itself is slippery,
to grease the huge determinisms of capital’s narrative. This is a text that creates its effects with the subjunctive, the perhaps, the subtle, the sugary understatement—yet it is implacable as the closing of a coffin-lid in sealing fate. One example:

The history of sugar in the United Kingdom has been marked by many ‘accidental’ events, such as the introduction of bitter stimulant beverages in the mid-seventeenth century. But sugar consumption’s rise thereafter was not accidental; it was the direct consequence of underlying forces in British society and of the exercise of power. (p.150).

SYMBOLING
Mintz writes (p. 153–54) that ‘birth and death are universal in the sense that they happen to all human beings; our capacity to symbolize, to endow anything with meaning and then act in terms of that meaning, is similarly universal and intrinsic to our nature—like learning to walk or to speak (or being born or dying). But which materials we link to events and endow with meaning are unpredictably subject to cultural and historical forces.’

Meaning is thus subject (unpredictably) to forces. But what is the meaning of those forces? How did they escape symbolization? Where is the privileged point outside meaning whereby judgement on meaning can be rendered?

In Mintz’s book this point is social relations and the distribution of power in society. Unlike birth and death such relations are not subject to our capacity to symbolize. There lies our hope. They escape fate.

HISTORY AND DIFFERENCE
‘If there is any explanation it is historical.’ With these words Professor Mintz banishes hermeneutics to intellectual purgatory. Meaning becomes History. ‘When we pass onto our children the meanings of what we do, our explanation consists largely of instructions to what we learned to do before them’ (p.158). It is left to the historian’s historian to ask about the learner’s learning, and history is thus what exists—truly ‘the past in the present,’ to quote Professor Wolf. But one has questions about a view that chains the present to the past in this way. Do not the children pass something onto their elders?

What most anthropologists think about meaning can be summed up, Mintz says, by paraphrasing Clifford Geertz: human beings are caught in webs of signification they themselves have spun. Mintz strongly objects. Not only is meaning historical, it is also determined by differences between groups in society (in an older earthier discourse, by class struggle). ‘The assumption of a homogenous web,’ he writes, ‘may mask, instead of reveal, how meanings
are generated and transmitted. This is perhaps the point where meaning and power touch most clearly’ (p.158).

**TOUCHING**

‘The profound changes in dietary and consumption patterns in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe were not random or fortuitous, but the direct consequence of the same momentum that created a world economy, shaping the asymmetrical relationship between metropolitan centers and their colonies [and] the tremendous productive apparatuses, both technical and human, of modern capitalism. But this is not to say that these changes were intended’ (pp. 158–59).

Touching is the trope which Professor Mintz uses to displace the ‘web of meaning.’ Touching is what sweetness-and-power is all about. Touching consists in:

(a) listing dates and prices and volumes of sugar production and consumption; and
(b) giving some (to my mind extraordinarily limited) sense of the symbolism of sugar; and
(c) touching (a) with (b), implying some meaningful connection exists between the two

when in fact what makes the connection meaningful in Mintz’ text is a quality brought from outside—from Reality, from History, from the great narrative of Capitalism (‘the same momentum that created a world economy’).

**SWEETNESS AND POWER**

Touching involves the artful confounding of ‘cause’ with metonymy. Although historical discourse of the type Mintz employs strains to give the appearance of manifesting, if not establishing, ‘causal’ connections, what it really gives us is the continuous parading and constellating of bits and pieces to an imagined whole—bits and pieces of the world and world history in sugar.

When, at the very close of his book, and with his perennial charm and modesty, Professor Mintz suggests that his ‘connecting so minor a matter as sugar to the state of the world in general may seem like yet another chorus of the bone song—the hip bone’s connected to the leg bone, etc.’ (p.214)—we see quite clearly how the artful confounding of metonymic with causal analysis works. It succeeds (throughout the text, not just here at the strategic moment of closure) through Mintz’s very sweetness, the sense of the author
that the text tirelessly creates, with his wonderfully developed poetics of understatement, modesty, and subtlety.

Thus can the very next sentence after the bone song-disclaimer read, in a slashingly different key, 'But we have already seen how sucrose, this “favored child of capitalism”—in Fernando Ortiz’ lapidary phrase—epitomized the transition from one kind of society to another.'

Thus does the bone song become, through its own sweetness, power—the power of the story that seems to tell itself.

**UNDOING HISTORY**

Because of its furtive yet complete dependence on a narrative, that of Capitalism, to make its metonymic connections appear causal ones that can make ‘meaning’ seem like something secondary to ‘History,’ Mintz’s contribution to an Anthropology of the Modern Everyday does little more than reproduce a premodern anthropology chained ever more firmly to its past. To adopt the jargon: the task is not to do history but to undo it.

One way of doing this is precisely that of the bone song. We consciously dismiss the commodified storytelling of causal analysis and instead make the juxtaposition of metonyms our way of ‘doing history’ through its undoing—not for us the rosary beads and chains of causes and effects. Then we be confronted not by the power of Historical Discourse but by a quite different collation of meaning and power as generated by a modernist text of the modern and the mundane, striking with the left hand (the hand of accident and fortuity so abhorred by Mintz), irregularly challenging the inviolability of the referent, constantly problematizing reality instead of sustaining it by resort to the awesome power of Capital.

**STEMMING DESCENT**

I am sitting in a hot and waterless sugar plantation town in western Colombia, reading Professor Wolf’s book about commodities and colonies, *Europe and the People without History*. I have been coming back to this town every year since 1969. Everything Wolf writes in his book about plantation development strikes me as curiously over-general and, when applied to what I know about the history of the people of this town and of the surrounding plantations, wrong. What am I to make of the sort of knowledge this book creates, this book aimed at stemming a descent into triviality?

Wolf’s book is built on the impassioned appeal to make broader connections. Part One is titled ‘Connections,’ in bold type above a double-page reproduction of one of the de Brys’s engravings made in the year 1599,
depicting a moving caravan of armed traders together with their laden camels and mules. Why with this demand to broaden the context is there a terrible narrowing of interest? Why with the demand to look for connection is there blindness to the unexpected?

There are no surprises in this history of history-less peoples, and no escaping it either. It is more remorseless than fate. Making connections here means referring the part to the whole. The whole is already known. It is the world of trade and production. It is the whole world as a metaphysical entity. Its driving force is Capital Accumulation. Its destination is History.

Incidentally, the de Brys’ engravings, several of them dramatically featured in this book, are now emblematic of the European conquest of the New World, a graphic cliché like the use of Mayan glyphs to serve as signs of Latin America. But the de Brys, commissioned by Protestant Dutch and English merchants, rivals of the Spanish, never traveled far from Paris and certainly never saw the New World. Their task was to create images with which others—such as us, today—would see that world’s newness. And they peopled it with humans taken from Classical ideals, from (the idea of) ancient Greece.

What sort of connections does the use of such imagery suggest we make? Perpetuated conventions raise the question of how we can ever see the newness of the New World. Could that be the true aim of History?

How strange that this book, so enthusiastically rooted in the deep soil of historical determinism, should itself be able to escape the ways by which history transmutes connections into conventions.

The plentiful use of maps of the world and its parts is interesting in this regard, because maps function to authorize, even more than photographs, the idea of the real. If the de Brys images authorize the ‘once upon a time’ of History, then the maps complement that realization with the notion that reality is not so much represented as copied.

This book is like a map, a copy, of the world. It looks down onto the world. But where does it look from, and how did it get there?

Curious, how one reads and says, So what? Is this not all terribly obvious, or an academicization of the obvious? It produces a strange effect. I, the reader, must be missing something—and the book is no longer obvious but mysterious. It’s all very well to talk so much about Historical Political Economy and of The Three Modes of Production that constitute World History. But aren’t there other modes of production to consider? What about the mode of textual production, alongside if not prior to the kinship, the
tributary, and the capitalist modes of production? What about modes of production of the real? And anyway, didn’t Marx subtitle his *Capital* a critique of political economy?

Overarching, thrusting, penetrating, choking, consolidating, expanding, shifting of gears, more thrusting—these are the terms this book pours forth. We seem to be caught between a machine and certain sorts of sexual acts, the colony a woman’s thighs, capitalism a penis, capitalism as juggernaut. The text evinces a strange pleasure in recounting this activity. It seems to be more than the pleasure of always being right. (In Kafka’s penal colony the official in charge of the torture machine puts himself into it and then sets it going, inscribing the death sentence in words on his very body. He enjoys it.)

—‘External warfare, trade, and internal consolidation created new states in Europe [and] agriculture ceased to grow, perhaps because the available technology reached the limits of its productivity. The climate worsened’ (p.108).

—‘Trade and warfare necessarily fed upon each other.’

—‘The State needed the merchants.’

Thus does this writing animate things and abstractions of things; war becomes a person, a spirit, or a god. It creates States. So does trade. They feed on each other. Internal consolidation also creates (States). Agriculture stops growing. Technology reaches. And all this spiritualization of things is on a par with natural process; ‘the climate worsened.’ This mode of production of reality parallels Marx’s ironic, teasing observations about commodity fetishism whereby people become like things and things become like people. Only Wolf’s fetishism is not ironic. He is serious. He animates things in the same way as Capital. But as we know, the life thereby endowed is spectral.

A text that so closely reproduces the life-force of capital as its own innermost mode of production is a bullying text. In its attempt at critique through relentless repetition of the terrific power of capital, such a text joins forces with that power. Grim determinism and grim determination to ‘face reality’ combine. How could we undo this combination in a way that would never let itself be assimilated to capital’s fetish power?

Authoritarian realism: in siding with the power of capital through this mode of reality production, everything loose is nailed down, as the expression goes. Nailed down to what? To an integrated (imaginary) whole.

This totality is made in part through the continuous use of violent verbs in the passive voice. The usage not only makes the violence of the text strategi-
cally ambivalent—both violent and controlled (by whom? by what?)—but also creates the sense of past-perfect action completed, action finalized. It makes it difficult to see history as a living force in the present. Instead history comes across as judgment, and the Final one at that.

I keep coming back to the question What is history? What is historical explanation? What is historical understanding? The answer seems to be taken for granted in the text. I must be the only one who doesn’t follow. Surely, ‘history,’ like religion, is here endowed with the moral authority of the past?

One gets only a negative idea of what historical understanding is: it is not what anthropologists did or still do in studying so-called primitives as pristine survivals from a timeless past. But one cannot define history and historical understanding from their (supposed) absence, like filling an empty bucket. Everything is securely established in this text, and the first thing securely established is the inviolability of the text’s own procedures and modes of explaining. History is never given the chance to marshal a counterattack and devour the means by which it is invoked.

‘There were several reasons for Huron success in this role’ is typical of the text’s attempts to recreate a world in which everything has its reasonable reason. In this instance of the Hurons’ relationship with the French, the Hurons ‘occupied a strategic location for [trade] exchanges.’ In fact it boils down not to several but to one Reason capable of infinite multiplication.

Explanation is thus a matter of ‘unravelling the chains of causes and effects at work in the lives of particular populations’ as ‘the totality [which is the world] developed over time’ (p.385). What more could one say? As against ‘the totality’ not people, but ‘populations.’

What about people, the ‘people without history’? Wolf distinguishes his way of creating historical understanding from that of the (now largely defunct) Modernization School (with its concept of ‘traditional society’), and from that of André Gunder Frank and of Immanuel Wallerstein, by the fact that they all omit considerations of the precapitalist modes of existence of the ‘micro-populations habitually studied by anthropologists,’ and ‘of the manner in which these modes were penetrated, subordinated, destroyed, or absorbed, first by the growing market and subsequently by industrial capitalism’ (p.23). Wolf distinguishes his own position by its undertaking an examination of just such penetration, subordination, destruction, and absorption—of how (for example) ‘Mundurucú or Meo were drawn into the larger system to suffer its impact and to become its agents’ (p.23). The totality rests its immense weight on this examination.
I read statistics and see maps bordered with anthropological jargon of authenticity and titles of classes (the planter class, peasants, wage labor, serfdom). Categories unfold like the Stations of the Cross: the scenes are static, but with faith the believer is moved toward the great ascent. In the section 'The Movement of Commodities' the first example of how Wolf's Historical Political Economy will shatter anthropological understanding of the dreadful ahistorical variety concerns rice and the concept of the 'loosely structured social system' advanced by John Embree in 1950 to characterize, so Wolf writes, Thai society. There is a growling and huffing in the text at this crucial point, but one gathers that anthropological discourse concerning Thai society is both single-voiced and intent on claiming nonhistorical 'reasons' for such looseness of structure. 'Yet,' continues and concludes Wolf, 'the features of [the Thai village] Bang Chan that led to its characterization as 'loosely structured'—like the features of other Thai villages caught up in the rice economy in other ways—must [sic] be understood not merely as social structure of a certain kind but as the outcome of the expansion of commodity production' (p.321).

That's Rice. That's the examination and illustration of how the people without history in Thailand got theirs—enormously inconclusive; a mouse's squeak. And remember, this is the book that begins with the plea to make connections. Next comes Meat. The Aborigines of Australia are fitted into Meat, where we find one paragraph of eleven lines about the people without history, a paragraph that tells us (a) pastoralists and natives clashed over land and water, and the natives were largely overrun, some like 'the Walbiri' (people without history are rarely differentiated) becoming wage hands, and (b) the anthropologist Mervyn Megitt 'noted that in the mid-1950s the Walbiri made use of their increased leisure, freed from the stringent demands of food collecting by the transition to wage work, to intensify their social and ceremonial activities' (p.321). Next, Bananas.

Not a word inviting us to wonder what those 'ceremonial activities' might be saying to us about commodification as seen from the central desert—about the meat that enters into labor-power and the labor-power that enters into meat—let alone what it means to have time bourgeoisified into 'work' and 'leisure time.' Instead, this supposed critique of commodities sustains their very cultural categories.

Bananas. Here the 'examination' of the effect on 'populations' of the movement of commodities, the examination designed to manifest the unraveling of chains of causes and effects as they intertwine in the totality, concludes
in the same spirit as Meat, with a similarly curiously out-of-place ‘set-piece’ apparently aimed at showing the causative role of the commodity economy on ‘culture’ as ‘effect’—that mechanization was probably the main cause of a ‘native millenarian movement’ (note the jargon) among banana plantation workers in western Panama.

There cannot be even a whisper in a totalizing project such as Professor Wolf’s that this native millenarian movement may have something to teach us about the equally millenarian movement of commodities. Its function in history is to be his example. But might there not be in this ‘reaction’ in western Panama a theory of history and the commodity from which we could all ‘react’ in our turn, so as to gain not that sublime point outside history to which Professor Wolf strives, but the see-sawing inside-and-outside mobility of positions required to match and mismatch the fetishized view of commodified reality to which Wolf’s text grants such eloquent, indeed overwhelming, testimony.

NOTES

1. See Susan Buck-Morss’s article on the Passagenwerk in New German Critique no.29 (1983), which is especially helpful on this argument.


ADDITIONAL AUTHOR’S NOTE

This essay was written as long ago as November 1986 in Puerto Tejada in the canefields of western Colombia, and in Bogota, capital of that beleagured Republic. It was written in response to a request from Professor S. Kaplan, one of the editors of the journal Food and Foodways, asking me to write an article-length review of Professor S. Mintz’s book, Sweetness and Power, as a contribution to the issue of the journal devoted in its entirety to an examination of that book. Sensing that the rhetorical energy in the Mintz book, focussing on History and on the Commodity, overlapped with Professor E. Wolf’s intentions in his work, Europe and the People Without History, a book I had not seriously studied, and that the contemporary revivalist enthusiasm for History in American Anthropology was—to say the least—naive, untheorized, and unself-critical, I undertook to write a review that included my working through the Wolf book as well as Sweetness and Power, a review which set forth in its form as well as in its content—as if these could ever be separated—the challenge and implications that the commodity-principle, understood historically, delivers to writing and rewriting the real. The late Bob Scholte, on the editorial board of Critique of Anthropology, (note Critique), wanted very much to also publish this review-article on its completion in December 1986 in that journal. Its belated publication now serves to acknowledge his singular encouragement.