Political geographers of the past VI

1. Thirty years on: or, Whatever happened to Wittfogel?

PETER J. PERRY

Department of Geography, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Thirty years ago a German American scholar published a book which set out to explain one of the most striking characteristics of the modern world—the abundance of dictatorial regimes—in basically geographical terms as the direct and indirect consequence of irrigation agriculture. Wittfogel's thesis, presented above in the simplest and necessarily crudest form, generated a lively debate across the whole range of social sciences. At the one extreme it was regarded as 'semi-hysterical' (Hodges, 1981: 105) or 'a vulgar charivari devoid of any historical sense' (Anderson, 1974: 487); at the other it was seen as 'a work of flawless scholarship' of such importance that it might 'even outrank that of the entire corpus of theoretical literature in political science' (Murdock, 1957: 545). Few books have so thoroughly polarized reviewers: few authors have witnessed so violent a debate, in which Wittfogel was often a reluctant and perhaps misunderstood participant, as to their ideas and their personal integrity. Moreover this particular debate is compounded by the hagiographic and uncritical quality of the major recent study of his ideas, rich though it is in factual material (Ulmen, 1978). While after thirty years the debate has died down, it has neither withered away nor lost its significance. Currently citations of Wittfogel, mostly but not all of his major book Oriental Despotism (1957), in Social Sciences Citation Index run at about 20 a year—Wittgenstein runs at about 500! Or on a cruder criterion the Cambridge University library copy of the book is borrowed about four times a year, is in poor condition and needs replacement!

Since Oriental Despotism appeared the world political situation has, at least in Wittfogel's terms of reference, deteriorated. The former colonies, whose political future is anxiously discussed in the book, have more commonly developed into totalitarian than democratic regimes. The boldness of the hypothesis in its own right and as a restatement of Marx's position remains a subject of debate in practically every relevant discipline—except geography. The supreme irony is that a quintessentially geographical explanation of the world political order has raised angry debate among, inter alia, anthropologists, sociologists, historians and political scientists while it has been largely ignored by geographers. This fact certainly tells us something about present-day geography (and political geography) and justifies an essay in not necessarily rehabilitation but evidently in rediscovery. Given that as a Marxist 'who has absorbed his Marxism and survived as a critical intelligence'—a characteristically witty and perceptive remark by O. H. K. Spate (Spate, 1959: 309)—Wittfogel
has been most often and severely criticized by more or less orthodox Marxists. It is interesting to note that the most recent geographical discussion by Peet (Peet, 1985: 324), himself a Marxist, rates the work very highly both in terms of intrinsic content and broader significance.

*Oriental Despotism* was and remains Wittfogel's masterpiece, the culmination of a distinguished and diverse scholarly career. The author was born and educated in Germany. In a typically extensive German university education he studied, among other things, geography and geology at Rostock and Berlin (under Penck) before becoming what can only be described as a typical and prolific Marxist intellectual of the Weimar Republic. He was briefly imprisoned by the Nazis and notes the book's origins, if not its actual writing, in this experience as emanating from the requests of some fellow inmates 'to explain to all who would listen the inhumanity of totalitarian rule in any form' (Wittfogel, 1957: vi). Sadly Wittfogel recalls that another group was interested only in revenge (1957: vi). Subsequently Wittfogel settled in the USA occupying a chair at the University of Washington. In his own view he remained a Marxist albeit critical and selective: he argued that the Soviet regimes had departed from Marxist thought. This fact coupled with the ways in which he was involved in the McCarthy hearings—on one view he there betrayed the liberal intellectual society which had provided him with a refuge, on his own view both McCarthy and for example Lattimore represented a fundamental threat to intellectual freedom—further ensured that most orthodox Marxists would be hostile to his views, albeit with exceptions already noted. This is in part an explanation of his difficulty in publishing *Oriental Despotism* and the vicissitudes of some translations. Now his reinterpretation of Marx remains at least formally unproven, extensively the subject of debate and reference, but curiously ignored by that discipline whose central position it might do most to enhance. That neglect will be returned to, but firstly the character of Wittfogel's arguments calls for exposition and evaluation.

To do so is of course to facilitate, and indirectly encourage, students not to read Wittfogel, a situation exacerbated by the length and occasional obscurity of *Oriental Despotism*. If by social science standards the book is not particularly difficult or tedious yet the mandatory warning—to read Perry instead of Wittfogel may be damaging to your intellectual well-being—is no formality. *Oriental Despotism* speaks to the present but analyses the past. It is about Asia but looks to the West. It condemns communism but thanks Marx.' (Ulmen, 1978: vi). In essence two points are proposed: firstly that the origins of despotic government are to be found in the initiation, implementation and operation of large scale hydraulic (especially irrigation) works; secondly that the idea of a distinctive Asiatic mode of production giving rise to a bureaucratic ruling class (as distinct from a capitalist ruling class) appears in an undeveloped form in Marx's writing but has been deliberately suppressed in Soviet-dominated Marxist thought because it is so cogent and exact a critique of the Soviet system. All sorts of issues emanate from this linked pair of concepts, for example the place of nature in Marxist social and historical thought. Ultimately Wittfogel's views tend to a reconstruction of the whole body of Marxist thought (since at an earlier stage Wittfogel also wrote on literature and aesthetics) along lines which some view as the heretical antithesis of the original but which others believe draw out the durable and essential, and in many cases neglected and undeveloped, elements so often overlain or suppressed in subsequent discourse.

In introducing the book Wittfogel traces the antecedents of scholarly concern with his subject in general oriental terms, and his own insights into its typical hydraulic associations and its uncomfortable implications both for the contemporary USSR and for newly independent states. The first substantive chapter examines the natural setting of hydraulic
society, the role of both institutions and environment and their interaction. Then the particular issue of irrigation and its initiation is discussed. The second chapter looks at the managerial aspects of the hydraulic economy stressing the division of labour and the need for planning in the ways in which they are distinctive in the irrigation situation, and the strong tendency for the powerful organizational structure of the waterworks to move into other areas of society. The consequence (chapter three) is the memorably phrased ‘state stronger than society’, a state organizational, acquisitive and prepared to allow private property to exist only in a weak form. This despotic power (chapter four) is total and any appearance of benevolence is illusory. It allows only very limited areas to remain beyond its control, fearful as it is of the use of independent sources of authority. (Throughout the book the contrast with feudal societies, the comparable level and indeed the only such level of development in orthodox Marxist thought committed to unilinear rather than multilinear social development, is stressed.) The consequential situation for the individual is summed up in the title of chapter five: ‘Total terror—total submission—total loneliness’. The tenor of the discussion again becomes more geographical in the sixth chapter which examines the relationship between the distribution and form of hydraulic societies, noting also their essentially static and non-developing character. The next two chapters look at property and class in hydraulic society, in the latter noting that the key determinant of class role in hydraulic society is relation to state apparatus. The ninth chapter is a history of the rise and fall of the theory of the Asiatic mode of production: an account of how the distinctive features of the Asiatic mode of production, notably the bureaucratic and managerial element, noted by Marx, Engels and Lenin, were at first neglected and later suppressed in the USSR because of their implications. The final (tenth) chapter examines hydraulic societies’ limited capacity for self-generated change, and hence their dependence on externally propelled or derived forces. This leads to speculation as to the future of both Asian and Western Society.

This compressed summary raises at least some of the important issues enshrined in a long and wide-ranging book. Understandably it generated a great deal of hostile criticism from Marxists. Much of this may be dismissed as ‘party line’—as early as 1930 Wittfogel’s work was being rejected in party circles and publications for theoretical reasons (Ulmen, 1978: 89)—or as ad hominem. Moreover Wittfogel’s involvement with McCarthy must be recalled at this point. While to the hard line party member Wittfogel is ‘one of the most evil renegades in the history of the Communist movement’ (Ulmen, 1978: 473), the Italian Marxist Melotti writing on the third world regards his interpretation of Marx as mechanistic, but goes on to observe that the author’s importance (and courage) is as an early and prescient critic of Stalin who raised awkward and important questions. He also comments on misrepresentation of Wittfogel’s views by his critics (Melotti, 1977: 13–14, 142).

The most basic though not necessarily most significant or effective criticisms of Wittfogel relate to his philosophy and methodology. Thus looseness of terminology and definition (Eberhard, 1958: 447), the underlying assumptions (Toynbee, 1958: 196–198), the establishment of hypotheses incapable of falsification (Pulleyblank, 1957: 352) and the apparent circularity of some arguments have been put forward (Carter, 1977: 19–20). Not all of these are fundamental: thus the chicken and egg circularity of the relationship between urban origins and the beginnings of irrigation need not invalidate the hypothesis of the eventual connexion with despotic political institutions. The question as to falsifiability invariably arises when a hypothesis attempts to be wide-ranging and it may be that a more compact theory would stand up better on this score than Wittfogel’s extensive attempt to make everything fit. Nevertheless it docs raise fundamental issues: thus Pulleyblank (1957: 352) notes the lack of clarity in Wittfogel’s concept of progress as equivalent to societal
change, a concept apparently inapplicable to so basic a movement as that from communal to private landownership. In fact the lack of clarity relates to the possibility of falsification. As to assumptions, Wittfogel the Marxist is predictable in his emphasis on material circumstances as opposed to ideas, and has been criticized for ignoring the role of the latter as democratic bastions (Pulleyblank, 1957: 352–353). Interestingly, however, the importance of ideas is occasionally central to the argument, ‘an insufficient love of freedom’ (March, 1974: 94) being one of the mechanisms enabling the Chinese environment to have such doleful effects.

On a narrower view of the falsification issue Wittfogel’s handling of the evidence is a matter of debate among the critics. Is he a good historian in the technical sense? Both his general historical understanding and particular points, such as the Leningrad debates of 1929 (Plotkin and Howe, 1985: 307) and much of Chinese history (March, 1974: 92), are criticized in this context. Again some of these criticisms are also directed at the possibility of any broad sweep approach. Moreover as Steward notes synthetic research of this kind invariably generates new empirical work which undermines the original (Steward, 1978: 4). (Similar criticisms could of course be directed at Marx and, among Wittfogel’s critics, Toynbee.) Along the same lines Levy points out that Wittfogel fails to explain or account for failures of despotic regimes: ‘the inept are no doubt a powerful explanatory element in history, but they are not a wholly sufficient one’ (Levy, 1957–8: 466). Other reviewers however admired the work’s historical breadth and insight (Ulmen, 1978: 480–489). In these two areas Wittfogel’s position has been etched or scarred but not in my view turned let alone destroyed.

A third body of criticism concerns itself with his reputed ethnocentricity, on the basis of his view that despotic societies initiated in irrigation had reached an inevitably developmental dead end and only external western intervention could bring about change and more particularly democratic development. This was as highly contentious an argument in the late 1950s as in the 1980s: it makes Wittfogel appear as a racist or colonialist (Toynbee, 1958: 197). In fact the reverse is the case as Wittfogel argues that the defects of Marxist orthodoxy, which he seeks to remedy, arise from its ethnocentricity and limited knowledge and understanding of world history beyond Europe. Thus Niemeyer (1958: 267–268) comments: ‘how different Marx’s theory of the class struggle would have been had he considered the data of Asiatic society’ since ‘Marxism is precisely rooted in a parochial (and at that mistaken) view of Western institutional history as a pattern of universal validity’. It is not surprising given this internal tension within Wittfogel’s position that Melotti described it as ‘ambiguously ethnocentric’ (1977: 25). Mature reflection suggests that as a multi-linear rather than unilinear interpretation of Marxism Oriental Despotism elevates the importance of non-European history and society.

As the outline of Oriental Despotism provided above indicates, Wittfogel asserts that geographical conditions are of fundamental importance. Oriental Despotism begins with an account of the natural setting: equally important but less often commented upon is the weight laid upon the spread of ideas and institutions from the core to margin, sub-margin and beyond. Clearly the idea of spatial diffusion is as central to Wittfogel’s thought as is that of environmental manipulation. The very idea that geography matters in the sense that natural conditions (and their management) are significant in the social sciences was expunged from Marxist orthodoxy in the early 1930s, re-emerging only, and controversially, in the early 1960s (Ulmen, 1978: 590–593). Wittfogel’s view remains then counter to the orthodox Marxist mainstream. Within the broader academic community Oriental Despotism has been condemned as a determinist undertaking. Thus Pulleyblank (not a geographer) comments ‘try as he might he cannot divest his theory of its deterministic
character' (1957: 352). Wittfogel himself describes his position thus: "economic and political institutions like all others develop on definite geographical foundations. They function within a specific territorial framework . . . they grow and change within a physical environment whose influence is determined by the society's historical level, structure and trends" (Ulmen, 1978: 231). Some geographers have thus recognized that Wittfogel has stated a probabilist or challenge and response position with considerable success and sophistication. His position is aptly summarized in the book in a section heading 'Historical conditions being equal, a major natural difference the possible cause of decisive institutional difference' (1957: chapter 1. c. i) or as Peet comments 'the objective structure of nature determines the direction taken by productive activity by providing natural materials and more importantly natural forces of production . . . environmental conditions were an origin of multilinear social development' (Peet, 1985: 330). Spate comments: 'it is difficult to improve on his formulation of the role of the geographical factor' (Spare, 1959: 309). Wittfogel was, it should be added, critical both of the determinists of the early 20th century, of Semple and Ratzel, and of the school of 'geopolitik'. In his view Montesquieu, Hegel and, among geographers, Ritter were more sound, although still inclined to understate the historical element (Ulmen, 1978: 89-103).

The third geographical criticism focuses upon Wittfogel's use of geographical materials and parallels criticism of his work as an historian. Thus March writes: 'China has no concrete landscape and no concrete historical period that can be pointed to as a credible illustration of anything approaching the pure type and mechanism of "oriental despotism"' (1974: 92); and Steward comments that "irrigation" is far too broad a rubric to have precise heuristic value' (1978: 7), 'the need is to recognise the particular combinations of factors including the kinds of irrigation which operated in each case' (1978: 13). In general, historical as well as geographical terms, this criticism is the inevitable consequence of wide-ranging scholarship especially when it ventures into controversial areas. Many individuals can competently question particular points: few are equipped to evaluate the broad issues with which the book is primarily concerned (Jones, 1958: 308).

A final potentially significant domain of criticism is the matter of what Wittfogel ignores. To some extent this has been dealt with already, the propensity to ignore facts which do not fit, the limited but not non-existent discussion of ideas. There remain others, reflections more of this critic's opinions than of a body of scholarly thought. Firstly, and very geographically, there is the matter of scale. Despotism is seen as emanating from large scale irrigation, but the necessary scale remains undefined save in an implicitly circular fashion. Nor is there substantial discussion of relationship and connexion between scales of irrigation. Secondly, in viewing irrigation on a large scale as the source of despotic government Wittfogel almost ignores the basic rationale of the technology: its capacity to support a high density of population and with considerable reliability, a sharp contrast with what could otherwise be done in these areas. Thirdly, the centralist character of despotism is suggested but not explored. Fourthly, the possibility that in some cases despotism might be the offshoot of other ways of life, of nomadism or in certain instances settled agriculture, is not considered although on empirical grounds the topic is worth looking at. In this particular context Wittfogel becomes as unilinear as his adversaries.

What then did happen to Wittfogel? Why has the impact of his work on geographical scholarship been so limited given that his thesis gives geographical conditions a central role? Firstly, it should be noted that Oriental Despotism was published at a date when geographers were even more racked with self-doubt than usual and when a traditional paradigm mildly favourable to that kind of work carried out by Wittfogel was being ousted by a positivistic paradigm of which the reverse was true. By the standards of extreme positivism Wittfogel's
ideas could never count as knowledge: they are no more than opinions. Secondly, political geography was at a particularly low ebb in the late 1950s and its subsequent revival proceeded along paths again relatively unlikely to foster an interest in Wittfogel. The revival of geopolitics, now apparent for example in *Political Geography Quarterly*, is more interested in the fragility of present peace than the origins of the present geopolitical order. Moreover, among the profound defects of contemporary political geography are a disinterest in political philosophy and a timid disinclination to recognize that most of the world's population endures more or less despotic government. Wittfogel remains out of tune with the times—an interesting comparison with present interest in the more narrowly focused Marxist revisionist Wallerstein. Significantly it was one of the more independent-minded geographers of the period of publication of *Oriental Despotism*, O. H. K. Spate, then probably best-known as a geographer of the Indian sub-continent, and the leading radical of a subsequent generation, Richard Peet, who had most time for this representation of Marx's ideas. Political dictatorship is arguably the dominant political form of the late 20th century and as such deserves a central position in political geography: it does not get it.

References