

Unit 4 Assignment:
Analyzing Historical Theories and Methods:
Greg Woolf's "Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West"

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The methods and theories employed to research, analyze, and argue historical assessments are often as varied as their targets of study. The twentieth-century, in particular, led to a great deal of historiographical innovations which have influenced the very nature of the modern historian's occupation. Greg Woolf's *Tales of the Barbarians* takes no exception to this observation. While his work makes extensive use of many historical theories, three in particular (ethnohistory, post-colonial history, and world history) constitute the bulk of his study. Although trace elements of virtually every body of twentieth-century historical methods may be detected and dissected within the pages of his book, attention shall only be given to the three aforementioned disciplines at work. Expanding on the plausibility of all contemporary influences would prove to be impractical within the assigned confines and scope of this particular case study.

Context and Content

As the full title implies, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West*, is a book that weighs the often misunderstood, and somewhat mythical, "savages" of antiquity against the industrious people of the early Roman Empire. Woolf's study is framed within the context of the Rome's early expansion into Western Europe following the transition from republic to empire.¹ The Romans often encountered, combatted, and assimilated a variety of barbaric cultures which Woolf, through "Roman eyes," explores in great detail. Those societies geographically located between the heart of Rome and the north Atlantic coast lay at the center of his work.² The bulk of the study focuses on the tribal peoples once located within what is now modern-day France, Germany, and United Kingdom.³

A professional historian, Woolf outlines his argument through the use of metaphor in a detailed and organized introduction. Essentially, he attempts to draw a parallel between the post-colonial studies used to examine the decolonization of nineteenth-century British colonies with those of early Rome.⁴ While Woolf is quick to point out that Rome was not in a technologically-infused “race” with other powers to colonize regions abroad (as was the case with nineteenth and early twentieth-century European powers), many similar issues nonetheless arose as a result of Rome’s imperialistic goals.⁵ In doing so, Woolf makes considerable use of post-colonial and ethnohistoric influences through, what Eric Martin refers to as, the “wide angle lens” of a world historian.⁶

Theories and Methods

As stated earlier, there are numerous historic elements afoot in Woolf’s work. Empiricist data is collected and presented to quantify several qualitative arguments, Marxist influence is prevalent through the interpretation of class struggles and social strife, and the book is even bound together through the use of a creative and engaging narrative. However, analyzing all of these numerous elements would prove to be a massive task not suitable for a paper of such brevity. Instead, it is the intent of this study to focus on the most overt and widely used disciplines throughout the course of the work. Described in length, the use of post-colonial history, ethnohistory, and world history shall be explored in detail.

Post-colonial history, as presented by the authors of *The Houses of History* is a study of, “The period since the Second World War [which] has often been described as the age of decolonization.”⁷ While this argument, that a book covering the exploited cultures of the early Roman Empire is in some way related to the post-colonial period of the latter twentieth-

century may at first appear not to be a valid one, it is important to note that the technique, vice the subject matter is the target of this analysis. Woolf, himself, goes at great lengths to immediately clarify and dismiss this potential disparity. He states, in his introduction:

Rome's penetration of Europe was easy to imagine as a precursor of the Scramble for Africa. Many versions of the analogy have since been presented. There have been noble Britons, and British victims as well as British savages. Scholars have drawn attention to the limitations of the comparison, from at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet successive generations of revisionists have found it easier to exchange domination and exploitation for the civilizing process than to decolonize our histories of the Roman West. Post-colonial studies have in many ways only prolonged our double identification with Roman imperialism and its victims.⁸

Holding true to his preface, Woolf does indeed make extensive use of the post-colonial concept of historical studies. The fourth (and final) chapter of Woolf's work thus appropriately examines the "post-colonial" aspects of those people left in the wake of Rome's imperial march through Western Europe.⁹ Citing the work *Agricola*, by the Roman historian and statesman Tacitus, Woolf comes to a series of conclusions indicative of many contemporary post-colonial studies.¹⁰ While Tacitus was known to certainly "flavor" his historical accounts with the unbridled use of narrative fiction, *Agricola* nonetheless highlights several important points.¹¹ First, tribal Britons and Gauls suffered under the oppressive boot of a corrupt Roman government which stifled and banned many of their cultural traditions.¹² Second, many Romans felt that the only way to prove their worth in such a corrupt domestic environment was through battle abroad- namely, conflicts in Britannia and Gaul¹³. Lastly, the very perspective from which Tacitus writes *Agricola* conveys an inherent feeling of dominance over the barbarians.¹⁴ The tone is reminiscent of a post-colonial concept, referred to as "orientalism," typically used to divide the oppressed from the oppressors during the nineteenth-century colonization of opium-laden China.¹⁵

Woolf's interpretation of *Agricola* also introduces the second concept most widely employed throughout the course of his study. Ethnohistory, or the anthropologically-influenced and "interdisciplinary" approach of analyzing societies lacking written source documents, is typically employed in a variety of fashions.¹⁶ Particular to this specific example, is Woolf's use of a technique referred to as "reading against the grain" of Tacitus' work.¹⁷ In doing so, Woolf intuitively fills in some subjective gaps otherwise omitted from *Agricola*. The aforementioned subconscious posturing of Tacitus, as man of superior stature to that of the "barbaric" Britons and Gauls is one such example.¹⁸ Interestingly, Woolf also dedicates a portion of his work to interpreting the "ethnography" of other scholars.¹⁹ The writings of Pliny the Elder, an early Roman philosopher, are often cited by Woolf while validating his arguments.²⁰ For example, a passage from one of his works is presented early in the first chapter of the book:

Africa, the Greeks called Libya, and the sea before it the Libyan Sea. Its limit is Egypt and no other part of the world offers fewer harbours, since the coastline extends from the west in a long curve. The names of its peoples and its towns are mostly impossible to pronounce, except by the natives who live almost entirely in fortresses.²¹

From the above passage, and others contained within Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Woolf extrapolates tones and themes often later found in works concerning the domination of Western Europe.²² Again, common ethnohistoric "tells," such as the societal divides and exhalations of certain cultures above others, are frequently expressed in the background of Tacitus and his Roman contemporaries' accounts.²³ In short, Woolf draws his own ethnographic conclusions from documents generated by etic entities, such as Roman writers, philosophers, and statesmen.²⁴

Woolf's encompassing view of multiple sources, from different locations and eras, embraces the final concept most readily used in *Tales of the Barbarians*. World history, as outlined by Martin, is inclined to, "ask big questions about how the world works as a whole and the interest in developing innovative techniques to answer such large-scale, complicated questions."²⁵ More specifically, world historians embrace large concepts that span over a variety of dates and places.²⁶ In turn, world historians then attempt to analyze and detect either commonalities or disparities between their observations to answer complex cultural questions.²⁷ This comparative assessment, pertaining to Woolf's work is a relatively prevalent one. However, while the use of world historic theory in his work may be somewhat obvious, it is employed in a very clever fashion. While Woolf states earlier comparisons of empires have been made by countless scholars, it is not the romantic founding of sophisticated societies that frames his work.²⁸ Woolf, instead, illustrates the catastrophic effects of unchecked imperialism on oppressed cultures.²⁹ Drawing a unique ethnographic comparison between the decolonization of Africa in the latter part of the second millennium, with the cultural vacuum created by the initial thrust and later fall of the Roman Empire, typifies the work of a world historian.

Conclusion

While many historical methods are indeed present within the scope of Woolf's book, *Tales of the Barbarians* bears the bulk of its academic weight on the foundations of post-colonial, ethnographic, and world historical theory and methodology. His scrutiny of the mythical misconceptions surrounding oppressed European cultures is typical of post-colonial works concerned with more modern developments; the use of ethnohistory is evident in the

frequent analysis of etic documents describing these subjugated populations; and the manner in which he weaves these concepts together embraces the predominate qualities of world history. From a scholarly perspective, Woolf's work is a compelling argument that sheds new light onto the plight of oppressed European tribal cultures. However, *Tales of the Barbarians*, as an academic case study, also has significant value while exploring contemporary historiography. His effective use of readily identifiable theories and methods at once lends weight to his argument while also serving as a fine example of modern historical studies.

Notes

1. Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West*, (Malaysia: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 2-3.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6. Eric Martin, World History Connected, "World History as a Way of Thinking." Last modified 2008. Accessed January 23, 2014.

7. Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999), p. 277.

8. Greg Woolf, p. 2.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

15. Anna Green *et al.*, p. 280.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

18. Greg Woolf, p. 91.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

25. Eric Martin, 2008.

26. *Ibid.*, 2008.

27. *Ibid.*, 2008.

28. Greg Woolf, pp. 2-3.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

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