

Karl August Wittfogel

Wittfogel, Karl August (1896-1988). In his book *Rivers of Empire*, Donald Worster (p. 23, 24, and 29) provides an excellent short biography of Karl August Wittfogel.



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"Wittfogel was born in 1896 in the Hanoverian village of Woltersdorg, Germany. He grew to maturity during the most tumultuous period in modern times, the era of the two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the fascist madness, and the rise of totalitarianism. In 1920 he joined the German Communist party, subsequently becoming one of the leading Marxist scholars in the Weimar Republic. But he was also, in this chaotic swirling of ideas, a student of the writings of that other seminal thinker in Germany, Max Weber. It was Weber who first introduced him to the peculiar "hydraulic-bureaucratic official-state" in China and India, and as a student of those states, Wittfogel soon made his reputation by attempting to discover how their bureaucratic apparatus had come into being and what impact it had had on their social structure."

"In his first work, *Economy and Society in China*, published in 1931, he attempted the difficult task of merging Weber's emphasis on the influence of bureaucracy on thought and power with Marx's analysis of economic class relations and politics. That significant early work was written at the Institute for Social Research--popularly known as the Frankfurt School--which Wittfogel had joined in 1925."

"Just as he was launching himself on his career as an Asia scholar, however, Wittfogel's world fell apart. In 1933 Adolf Hitler took command of Germany, and immediately the young scholar found his life in danger, for he had been an outspoken critic of fascism, assailing it from the public platform in city after city. While attempting to flee the country, he was picked up by the police and thrown in a concentration camp."

"A vigorous outpouring of protest from English and American intellectuals persuaded the Gestapo to release him after several months, and thereupon he migrated to the United States, first to Columbia University, then to the University of Washington, where he taught Chinese history until his retirement in 1966. By that point, he had long since forsaken his early communist enthusiasms--if fact, he had become rigidly anticommunist, attacking the Russians as vigorously as he once had the fascists. His was a wild, heady life, one that was always in the thick of momentous issues." Today it is hard to find any treatise on ancient hydraulic society that does invoke Wittfogel's ideas.

He published *Oriental Despotism: A comparative Study of Total Power* in 1957. The book examines the origins of complex societies and states. Historical in nature, the book identifies the management of water as a method used by Chinese emperors to gain power over their people. The emperors developed "hydraulic societies" which were dependent on complex irrigation systems. Wittfogel felt that the cost of hydraulic construction and its subsequent maintenance required a political and social structure capable of forceful extraction of labor. This led to despotism. "Those who control the (hydraulic) network are uniquely prepared to wield supreme power."

"Even as Wittfogel was wandering off into anticommunist tendentiousness, he began to acquire a following among a new groups of scholars, the cultural ecologists in anthropology. They were less interested in either his new or his old politics than in his theory of irrigation and society. In 1953 Julian Steward, an anthropologist at Columbia and later at University of Illinois, asked Wittfogel to join a symposium on irrigation assembling in Tucson, Arizona, where he would meet experts on Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica, intensely attracted to his hydraulic ideas."

Donald Worster (p. 30) criticizes the ecological anthropologists for not extending their studies and conclusions to modern hydraulic societies. "One of the most serious weaknesses in that literature, it must be said straight off, is that the modern experience with irrigation hardly appears in it. Nowhere do the ecological anthropologists--nor

does Wittfogel, for that matter--seem to realize that the link between water control and social power might occur in places other than the archaic cradles of civilization nor that the past hundred years have seen more irrigation development than all of previous history."

At 91, Karl Wittfogel died leaving behind his wife Ester Goldfrank, a renowned anthropologist.

Source: Worsher, Donald. 1985. *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and Growth of the American West*, Pantheon Books, New York.