

Obituary: Karl Wittfogel

# Hydrophobic cold war warrior

**K**ARL Wittfogel, Sinologist, Marxologist and polemicist, who has died in America aged 91, was born in Waltersdorf in Germany. In 1918 he joined the Independent Socialist Party and its successor, the German Communist Party. His political activism was unusual amongst the scholars of the Institut für Sozialforschung — the basis of the famous Frankfurt school of sociologists — but Wittfogel's first major work, *Economy and Society* (1931), a study of the social structure of ancient China, was published under the institute's auspices.

However Wittfogel was so peripheral amongst the Marxist intelligentsia in the Twenties that he was driven to the expedient of reviewing his own work under the pseudonym of Karl Peterson. It was as an anti-Marxist that Wittfogel would win wider intellectual recognition.

In 1933 he was put in a Nazi concentration camp because of his Communist activities. He was released later in the year after effective international pressure by concerned intellectuals, notably by R H Tawney of the LSE. His CP membership lapsed soon after. He went on to do field research in China between 1935 and 1938, still sponsored partly by the institute.

By 1940 Wittfogel was living in the United States and had shifted his politics dramatically, due in part to the influence of his third wife, Esther Goldfrank. In the Forties he established Sinological research at Washington and Columbia. In 1951 he testified before the McCarran Committee — the internal security sub-committee of the Senate Judiciary Committee. His testimony implicated, among others, the classicist Moses Finley, who in

consequence left for Britain. Wittfogel's testimony included the poignant regret that his academic contacts dried up when he became an avowed anti-Communist.

It was as the author of *Oriental Despotism* (1957) that Wittfogel achieved the world-wide attention of historians, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists and Marxologists.

Three theses were advanced by Wittfogel: First, the hydraulic thesis that the large-scale despotic empires of the pre-industrial world had their foundations in their inhabitants' dependence upon imperial management of water supplies. Second, the sociological thesis that such empires were stagnant, incapable of nurturing capitalist modernisation. Third, the ideological thesis that Marx and Engels — and later Marxists — suppressed their knowledge of Oriental despotisms.

Indeed Wittfogel argued that Marx "committed a sin against science" in repressing his understanding of Oriental despotisms. Marx had done so because they undermined central tenets of historical materialism. They were stagnant, and thus refutations of the Marxist belief that all social orders are functional for the development of the productive forces; they were regimes in which the ruling class depended for its position upon its location in the state apparatus rather than private ownership of the means of production; and above all they were the agrarian analogues of the industrial societies which socialists were pledged to build — centralised, coercive, ideological, illiberal, historical cul-de-sac. Oriental despotisms were parables for the future of socialism.

These arguments, advanced during the height of the Cold

War, ensured that Oriental despotism received both effusive critical acclaim and virulent condemnation. The extent of praise and contempt was mostly a function of critics' locations in the Communist/anti-Communist ideological spectrum. A notable example of gushing praise came in an American political science journal in which Wittfogel's book was described as "a work of flawless scholarship". The reader was informed that "Had Wittfogel's book been published a hundred years ago, Marxism could not have developed", and that the text in question was a "watershed book", a book of which people were likely to speak in terms of "before and after". Marxists by contrast rejected Wittfogel as a renegade and charlatan.

Critical attention to his methods and evidence was scarce, by comparison with dogmatic endorsement or rejection of their political implications. Sober appraisal of Wittfogel's historical interpretations — whether of pre-industrial China, India or Russia, or of the almost innumerable other pre-industrial polities which he claimed to have systematically examined — was slower to develop. Scholarly examination of the merits of his Marxology was also thin on the ground. However in the three decades since its publication, the theses of Oriental despotism have been either refuted or severely qualified by sounder scholars less influenced by the Cold War. The hydraulic hypothesis has been undermined by the demonstration that the irrigation methods of the early civilisations rarely involved centralised hydraulic technology, but rather were based upon "spontaneous" irrigation techniques developed at a local level. The causal nexus



Managing the supply of water in pre-industrial China: this two-man chain pump was known as the 'dragon's backbone'. ILLUSTRATION FROM THE TIEN-KUNG K'AI-WU COLLECTION (17th century).

between hydraulic irrigation and Oriental despotism is at best a spurious correlation, and at worst the product of a selective use of historical evidence.

The sociological thesis, which supposes Occidental uniqueness and Oriental stagnation, has survived. But its worst Eurocentric aspects have been discredited, and its development owes more to Weber than Wittfogel. Finally, Wittfogel's Marxological theses have been falsified: neither Marx nor Engels suppressed their knowledge of Asiatic societies. The suppression of what Marxists call the Asiatic mode of production was another of Stalin's misdemeanours. Wittfogel's correct claim that the Asiatic mode of production is an embarrassment for

Marxists must be separated from his false accusation that Marx committed a sin against science in this instance.

To the end of his life, Wittfogel proclaimed himself a better Marxist than Marx, Engels or Lenin. He, not he, had betrayed historical materialism.

In his intellectual dogmatism, technological determinism, wishful thinking, and selective attention to facts, he certainly resembled the founding fathers of Marxism. He proved that the ideas of heretics are often as unattractive as those of the churches they rebel against.

**Brendan O'Leary**

*Karl August Wittfogel, born 1896; died May 25.*

## Birthdays

The Duchess of Gloucester, 42; Arthur Bell, director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 62; Lord Brightman, a former Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, 77; Catherine Cookson, novelist, 82; Wendy Craig, actress, 54; the Earl of Cranbrook, zoologist, 55; Ronald Hines, 53;

Lamb, England cricketer, 34; Johnny Morris, broadcaster, 72; Budge Rogers, former England rugby footballer, 49; Sir Richard Southwood, Linacre Professor of Zoology, Oxford, 57; Claire Tomalin, writer, 55; Mr Justice Tudor Evans, 68; the Rt Rev John Waine,

## Deaths

Dame Elizabeth Lane, 82, was the first woman to be appointed a High Court judge in Britain. She was appointed to the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division in 1965, and before that had achieved two other firsts for women, as a county court judge and... a divorce

Lucien Cardin, 69, was the French Canadian Justice Minister under Lester Pearson's Liberal government in the mid-Sixties who enlivened Canadian politics and the media with Ottawa's own Profumo-style scandal. Pressed in the Commons on a spy case, Cardin rounded out

John Diefenbaker with the word "Munsinger" (hilariously misheard in the Press Gallery as "Monsignor", a red-hat heretic). Gerda Munsinger, a Munich bar hostess who had entertained Diefenbaker's colleagues, played the Keeler role. Cardin blamed the trouble