
Alexander ANIEVAS and Kerem NISANCIOGLU, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*
(Pluto Press, London, 2015)

This is a remarkable book, deserving readers, reputation and critique. First, it offers a new explanation of the West's rise to prominence in world history, insisting at all times that this should not be explained in Eurocentric terms that stress some sort of miracle, based on unique European properties whether the nature of feudalism or the presence of rationality. Very much to the contrary, the emphasis here is on intersocietal connections, above all those of geopolitics, with claim upon claim being made as to ways in which Oriental ideas and institutions stood behind and indeed allowed Western achievements. Second, we have here something of a rebirth of Marxism, in a new guise. The account is Marxist most obviously in that the rise in question is considered to be that of capitalism, with all other social forces having only relative autonomy from what is considered to be the fundamental driver of history. But more is involved, namely the insistence that Marxist categories best explain how the West came to rule. On the face of it this is rather strange. The fact that Marx himself was most often Eurocentric to the core, perhaps above all when writing about Asia, is beyond question. But the authors build on key Marxist concepts in extremely interesting ways, and appear to have been influenced by Perry Anderson's view of the origins of capitalism "as a value-added process gaining in complexity as it moved along a chain of interrelated sites" [25]. There is a negative and a positive side to the discovery of Marx's better self. The ideas of Wallerstein's world-systems theory receive heavy criticism, despite the importance of considering the larger world, and so too do those of Brenner's political capitalism, held above all to have too narrow a view of labour power. One expects rebuttals from these Marxist schools, with Brenner being more than capable of defending his position. In contrast, great praise is given to Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development—and to very great effect. I have always liked Trotsky's view of war as the locomotive of history, and will now add to that "the whip of external necessity." They are particularly interesting—and I think wholly correct—when distinguishing

between the penalties of progress and the privileges of backwardness, that is, when insisting that fundamental social change comes from the peripheral margins of world history. But the point to be made is that the authors use the concepts to understand the world, their aim being empirical quite as much as conceptual. This brings up the third point. Huge volumes of secondary literatures have been consulted, making this a very substantial scholarly achievement.

The book is dense and rich, but some bare bones of the argument deserve emphasis. It is a great pleasure to see nomads being taken seriously in a Marxist text, on this occasion to say that the *Pax Mongolica* helped European development. First, Europe itself was spared much violence, shielded by the Mongol state—as Russian intellectuals have so often claimed. Second, the unification of the roof of the world is held to have expanded European minds, allowing for the transmission of ideas and technologies from China to the West. But there was, thirdly, a negative side to intersocietal contact, the Black Death, held here to have fundamentally changed class structure, weakening the power of landlords and allowing for the emergence of new centers of production. The discussion of the conflict between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans that then follows initially reiterates one of the points made about the Mongols. The struggle with the Ottomans meant that the Habsburgs were never able to completely dominate Europe, again providing the measure of protection that allowed for development in NW Europe. But a second point proves to be more fundamental to the general argument. Ottoman power blocked the trade routes to Asia, thereby driving NW Europe to explore the rest of the world.

Atlantic involvement matters very greatly to the authors. For one thing, the encounter with different peoples is held to have created key European concepts, the sense of superiority that lies behind Eurocentrism and the full meaning given to territorial sovereignty. For another, the colonies saved agrarian capitalism in England by siphoning off a dangerous excess of people, and then allowed for the erection of a plantation system based on slavery. The authors insist that capitalist development depended upon exploitation overseas. Capitalism depends on all sorts of labour, free, indentured and unfree, a realization that allows the authors to go beyond the work of Brenner in ways that make racism and patriarchy central to and best understood within Marxist categories. This claim is reiterated, albeit with less evidence, in later chapters on capitalism in early modern Holland and in eighteenth century Britain—but it is perhaps less

central, more about the expansion of an already established capitalism than about its crucial formative moment.

Three final elements of the book must be noted. First, a chapter on revolutions in Holland, Britain and France insists, against the drift of most modern scholarship, that they are best seen as bourgeois. This is not because bourgeois actors made the revolutions, rather that the consequence of the revolutions was the destruction of all sorts of blockages to the logic of developed capitalism. Second, crucial passages ask what specific features of Europe's social formation allowed capitalism to survive—as it had not survived when it emerged in different circumstances. What matters is endless geopolitical competition. At first sight it could seem that this might undermine their general arguments, as it appears to posit a European uniqueness. However, the authors insist that this is not the case. They do not accept for a moment realist views suggesting that the absence of a singular Leviathan creates a security dilemma leading to warfare between competitive states. On the contrary, states are held to have become competitive as the result of an internal sociological necessity: the weakening of landlord power after the Black Death meant that state power was embraced in order to escape the crisis of feudalism. This rapprochement had at its center an elevation of the power of merchants, who were able to provide capital for military purposes—provided of course that states conquered large parts of the external world on which their profits ultimately depended. There is great sense here, although I would characterize matters slightly differently—stressing the fact that capitalism was bigger than any single state as much as the capitalist character of states themselves. Finally, a concluding section suggests that Marxism properly understood should back all sites of contest, for they all have to do with the multi-faceted character of capitalism.

There is much here with which one can agree. For one thing, great imperial civilizations were settled and stable, and certainly much better at containing violence. Such social formations were well adapted to agrarian conditions, and so were unlikely to create new modes of production. Unsettled peripheries plagued by internal contradictions are indeed more likely to take a new step in social evolution. For another, it is certainly true that there are long lines of causation behind any particular social feature. More particularly, states do not spring out of thin air. It used to be maintained, for instance, that the Norman Conquest of England had a sociological base in terms of the need to employ younger sons who would not

JOHN A. HALL

inherit the familial estate. But at this point I start to disagree with the authors. The great stimulation of their work resides in its parsimony, in its insistence that the needs of capital lie behind key social developments. For all sorts of reasons I remain Weberian, believing for instance that the origins of the world religions and nationalism cannot be explained in the terms they propose—though it would be wonderful to see them address these issues. More to the point, there is a huge mass of evidence to suggest that many states, irrespective of the forces that have created them, have security matters at the center of their attention. Durkheim taught us to distinguish cause and function; we can follow him loosely in understanding the states of NW Europe. We can explain their origins, but must respect the fact that their lives were thereafter wholly autonomous—something which then fed back into the history of capitalism.

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