



Review of *How the West Came to Rule*

Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu. 2015. *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press. 386 pages, ISBN 978-0-7453-3615-2 Paper (\$40.00).

How the West Came to Rule reexamines a captivating but unsolved dispute in comparative historical sociology: the historical origins of capitalism in Europe. This is an extensively debated topic, but most discussions fail to provide a genuinely new answer to this venerable question. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu are a refreshing exception. Their arguments are clear and straightforward: First, they aim to explain why previous studies have not adequately explained capitalism's origins in Europe: to a large degree, past explanations—whether from a world-systems, Marxist or neo-Weberian angle—have been trapped in a Eurocentric perspective. Second, the authors are at pains to provide a new theoretical and historical approach by strongly emphasizing a geopolitical dimension that they call 'internationality.' For the authors, Europe's exceptionalism cannot be grasped through a holistic and singular conception of Europe as a social-political-economic system. Rather it must be sought in the "interconnected and sociologically co-constitutive nature of Europe," (43) which is characterized as uneven and combined development. In other words, the rise and emergence of capitalism in Europe cannot be explained without reference to the international context.

Anievas and Nişancıoğlu's arguments go one step further than scholars such as Kenneth Pomeranz. For example, in *The Great Divergence*, Pomeranz emphasizes two fortuitous factors in England's rise. One is coal deposits, which contributed to the production of iron and the development of the steam engine. The other is resources from the New World, including precious



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metals, and manpower, which allowed massive economic profits to be reaped from an expanded trade in sugar and cotton. While he recognizes that access to New World resources enabled England's quantum leap, Pomeranz downplays the importance of exploitation elsewhere, such as India and China, and fails to consider how commercial and non-commercial interactions between Europe and Asia contributed to the great divergence of the nineteenth century. *How the West Came to Rule* addresses some of these omissions.

The first and the most important part of Anievas and Nişancioğlu's work deals with the problem of Eurocentrism, tracing it via a wide-ranging and critical review of world-systems and Marxist scholarship. Treating the rise of Europe as a self-generating phenomenon has resulted in a superficial and one-dimensional perspective on this phenomenon so central to the field of comparative historical sociology. We take for granted a particular framing of this question, and its obverse: why was Europe the site of capitalism's emergence, and why did other countries not experience a similar lead forward? Yet what is implied in this question? Western countries are dynamic *ab initio*; hence, Western-centred modernity is natural, while non-European countries are static and incapable of self-transformation. As a result, although Eurocentric arguments vary widely, they share a strong belief: Europe's exceptionalism is an internal property reflecting endogenous capabilities. The focus on a singular European history strengthens a causal chain in accounting for Europe's exceptionalism, and obscures the contributions of non-Western societies to Europe's rise. By rejecting extra-European determinations or internationalist historiography, past studies have found Europe's great achievements in solitary social, economic, political and technological progress.

Wallerstein's account of the modern world-system is a typical example. According to Anievas and Nişancioğlu, Wallerstein's modern world-system is an *a priori* notion—that is, it is taken for granted. Wallerstein does not explain how it is organized, where it comes from or how Europe's extraordinary rise happened. Assuming that Wallerstein tends to take the Europe-centred world economy for granted, his recognition of Europe's exceptionalism hides wittingly or unwittingly Europe's second-mover advantage—that is, development occurring long before the 15th century. In contrast with Abu-Lughod's (1989) argument that benefits derived from non-Western sources fueled Europe's rise, Wallerstein was only interested in explaining the capitalist world-system as originating in Northwestern Europe. As Anievas and Nişancioğlu stress, without a deep consideration of the international or intersocietal relationship between the West and non-West, Wallerstein's modern world system does not escape from Eurocentrism.

Based on the essential concept of internationalist historiography, Anievas and Nişancioğlu reveal how the nomadic Mongol Empire played an important role in ushering in an epochal shift in European class relations in the 13th century. The expansion of the Mongol Empire facilitated international trade and cultural exchange, while also stimulating Italian city-states' economic

development. Europe, as a latecomer, reaped advantages, such as “mathematics, navigational invention, arts of war and significant military technologies” (67), from trading with Asia. Not only did Europe actively receive Mongols’ advanced civilization, but it also received the Black Death, which originated from the arid plains of Central Asia. Although this had devastating consequences throughout the whole of Europe, it triggered the terminal crisis of the feudal mode of production, thereby causing a fundamental shift of class relations in feudalism. The causal chain is thus: 1) the arrival of the Black Death -> 2) high mortality -> 3) sharp decrease in population and thus labor -> 4) an increase in wages -> 5) the development of labor-saving machineries or technologies, spurring the development of new types of productive forces and changing class relations-> 6) resulting in the critical breakthrough from feudalism to capitalism in Northwestern Europe.

One fascinating discussion in this book concerns “the Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry”. As Anievas and Nişancioğlu note, “the duality of Euro-Ottoman relations—both belligerent and collaborative” (120), was a prime mover for understanding Europe’s privileges of backwardness. Europe took advantage of the international trade established by the Ottoman Empire. The expansion of the Eurasian trade route during the Pax Ottomana not only provided Western Europe with “the transmission of social and technological knowledge” (109) but also enhanced its access to Eastern products. This international trade between the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe, however, brought forth conflicting results. The Ottoman Empire, which had a strong and stable centralized authoritarian regime, along with a tributary system, gave merchants few chances to rise. On the contrary, Western Europe, which had a “fragmented, parcelized, and therefore also highly competitive” (104) economic landscape, helped promote the rise of the merchant-entrepreneur class. In addition, military struggles between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburgs in the 1600s triggered the rise of the Reformation and elicited the breakup of the Hapsburg Empire. This military event paved the way for the dismantling of the Christian countries and accelerated the process of state-building by promoting geopolitical competition in Europe.

Not only did Pax Ottomana give Northwestern European countries the critical momentum leading to feudalism’s disruption and breakup, but it also let them open a new sea route. For Northwestern Europe, the invention of the Atlantic sea route was necessary to avoid the Ottoman Empire’s powerful influence on Mediterranean routes. As the Ottoman Empire, with its “conquests of the Black sea, Red Sea, and much of the Mediterranean” (115) controlled access to the seas, European traders had to find another trading route that was free from the Ottomans’ maritime hegemony. Consequently, the Ottoman blockade of the European merchants’ international activities, ironically, promoted Europe’s discovery of the New World. More significantly, “with the conquests of the eastern Mediterranean and its subsequent blockade, the Ottomans reconfigured the entire European balance of power, bringing with it a structural shift from the

commercial dominance of Adriatic city-states such as Genoa and Venice to the Northwestern European states positioned on Atlantic coast” (116).

As noted in chapter 5, the so-called European miracle, which was succeeded by the coercive and relentless exploitation of the resources of the Atlantic, was a decisive moment for Western Europe. The critical step towards global dominance in Europe originated from the deepest exploitation of the Atlantic trade. In the chapter titled “Atlantic Sources of European Capitalism,” Anievas and Nişancıoğlu discuss how Europe transformed Africans into slaves in the plantation system, how Europe exploited American resources and, ultimately, how the economic advantage that came with the expansion of the Atlantic trade contributed to Europe’s rise and global governance. In so doing, they challenge not only explanations for Europe’s exceptional economic prosperity that display “a methodological internalism (in which European development is conceptualized as endogenous and self-propelling)” but also attendant “assumptions of historical priority (which posits the endogenous and autonomous emergence of modernity in Europe)” (127).

Anievas and Nişancıoğlu’s analysis of capitalism’s historical origins in Europe, which is based on Trotsky’s idea of uneven and combined development, allows us to break the trite, obsolete and slanted explanations within macrohistorical sociology about the ascendancy of the West. Through a sustained critique of world-systems and Marxist theory, this book profoundly challenges accounts of Europe’s rise as self-generating. Their contribution requires us to rethink the decisive roles of non-Western regions in Europe’s great divergence, and to appreciate the geopolitical origins of European capitalism.

References

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