

Review - How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism

Written by Chris Grocott

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CHRIS GROCCOTT, DEC 16 2015

How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism

By Alexander Anivas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu

London: Pluto Press, 2015

When and where did capitalism begin? This is a question which many scholars of economic history, sociology, and political economy, to name but three disciplines, have grappled with for well over a century. Anivas and Nişancıoğlu come to this debate with fresh theoretical tools and an analysis inspired by Marc Bloch's *longue durée* approach to historical development. The result is a book that ranges over a good thousand years of history, is informed by a rich engagement with theory, and that challenges the received wisdom of capitalist development.

In the classic Marxist historiography of the development of the history of capitalism, which Anivas and Nişancıoğlu engage with early on, Eric Hobsbawm's 'Age of' series remains the classic history of the development of capitalism.[1] Hobsbawm's analysis, drawing upon Marx's own stages of history model of economic development, located the origins of capitalism in late eighteenth century Europe. For Hobsbawm, the location of capitalism's birth was firmly in the Britain of the 1780s and based upon the cotton textile industry. Meanwhile, the origins of the political institutions that allowed capitalism to come to dominate European, and eventually global society and economy were to be found in the French Revolution. Thus by, say, 1790, capitalism was born; initially it was European capitalism, but during the age of empires it was to become global capitalism. For theoretical resources, Hobsbawm drew upon and modified Lenin and Luxemburg. As European capitalists sought fresh markets and raw materials they drew into capitalist relations the rest of the world, transforming it in their own image, and dislocating and dismantling indigenous forms of social and economic relations it found at the 'frontier'.

For Anivas and Nişancıoğlu this traditional location of the origins of capitalism in Europe is wholly unsatisfactory. They reject a view of capitalist development that elevates European 'capitalism to a universal stage of development through which all societies must pass in one form or other' (p. 41). For Anivas and Nişancıoğlu, the road to capitalism is one best understood through a re-engagement with Trotsky's theory of uneven development. Through the use of this concept, Anivas and Nişancıoğlu relocate the origins of capitalism geographically outside of Europe. Their chronology is therefore elongated, tracing the origins of capitalism through the Mongol Empire (chapter 3); the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires of the 'long sixteenth century' (chapter four); the New World of the Americas (chapter 5); and of course, Europe – but, strikingly, the with significant reference to the Dutch empire and, crucially, by noting the reflexivity of Southeast Asian economies upon Europe (chapters 6-7). Chapter Eight's analysis of the Great Divergence in many ways suggests that it was not so much the case that the British conquest of India which allowed the dawn of the capitalist era (with its Indian cotton and Lancashire textile mills) but rather that British control of India resulted in a situation whereby Britain could not help but be capitalist.

The broad chronology and densely packed theory of this volume will make it of considerable use to a variety of scholars. The earlier chapters, which deal with the various theories of capitalist development, will be of considerable use to political theorists. Later chapters examining regional case-studies of the development of capitalism will invite scholars of those regions to re-think the role which economies across the globe played in laying the foundations of

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capitalism. In terms of style, the divide between the theoretical chapters and the narrative is noticeable. Chapters 1 and 2 are densely written, and at times tough-going. But it is hard to see how a chapter which considers the relative merits of world systems theory, Marxist conceptions of capitalism, and postcolonial theory could be anything other. By contrast, later chapters zip by, with the chapter on the Ottoman-Hapsburg rivalry particularly noteworthy.

By rights, a reading of this book should leave the reader convinced that there was nothing specific about Europe which ushered in the age of capitalism. Indeed, a reading of this book should force the reader to conclude that there was not a dawn of an age of capital, precisely because capitalism was extant throughout the world at different times and to different extents for centuries before the starting point of Hobsbawm's *Age of Revolutions*. Nevertheless, I cannot help but grouse at this proposition. Much as I enjoy the work of Marc Bloch, one of the problems of the *longue durée* is that over a long enough period of time, to invoke Lenin, everything can seem connected to everything else. The result of this is a theoretical impasse. Eventually one ends up having to decide that some kind of change, be it economic, cultural and so forth, at some point in time represents a turning point, a moment when something which did not exist before manifestly exists after. Even Anivas and Nişancioğlu are forced to make such a distinction when considering the rise of the dominance of the West. For them, the turning points lies not at Arkwright's Cromford Mill, but between the British capture of 'Bengal in 1757 and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763' (p. 272).

Only the most ardent of un-reconstructed Marxists would so totally locate the birth of capitalism in the Europe of the late eighteenth century. Historians of all stripes are comfortable with the idea that examples of capitalism existed all around the globe prior to the 1780s. And so, perhaps, at points the case made by Anivas and Nişancioğlu is overstated. Crucially, however, *How the West Came to Rule* reminds scholars, particularly those whose work is primarily based in theory, that theory is only as useful if it helps us to understand empirical realities. This book challenges us to consider those realities which underpinned the development of capitalism, and the dominance of the West, and quite properly argues that we should reflect on our theory in the light of such analysis.

[1] Hobsbawm, E., *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1962); Hobsbawm, E., *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1975); Hobsbawm, E., *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1987); Hobsbawm, E., *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

About the author:

Chris Grocott is lecturer in Management and Economic History at the University of Leicester School of Management. He is interested in the development of capitalism, and political economy under capitalism, with specific reference to ideology, class, and imperialism. His research brings together traditional archival methodologies and theoretical insights derived from the social sciences. He also holds a long-standing interest in the history, politics and society of British Gibraltar since 1704.