
*How the West Came to Rule* is an ambitious study which synthesises an impressive breadth of scholarship in order to recast a Marxist critique of narratives of Western exceptionalism and Eurocentric historiography. Anievas and Nişancoğlu engage with critical episodes in “rise of the West” narratives and argue that the development of the European powers cannot be adequately understood without reference to non-European contexts. Deploying the theoretical tools of “Uneven and Combined Development” (UCD), the authors focus on how the non-European world laid the structural foundations for the emergence of capitalism in Europe and, by extension, paved its path to global dominance.

Straddling an engagement with anti-Eurocentric historiography (the “California School”) and Marxist historiography, the book finds its main theoretical antagonist in Political Marxism, an approach that coalesced around debates on the origins of capitalism (Chapter 1). Political Marxism sought to re-introduce concerns with historicism and contingent political conflicts by teasing out which historical ruptures brought capitalist social relations into becoming. Foundational to this tradition was Robert Brenner’s famous thesis that the breakthrough to capitalism first occurred in English agriculture during the early modern period and on the cusp of historically specific social struggles. At its time, this claim

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1 This review stems from a book presentation by the authors, hosted by the Warwick Political Geography group in February 2016 (http://geographywarwickteam.tumblr.com/post/144551768227/the-warwick-political-geography-group).

2 The authors refer most consistently to the works of Frank (1998), Hobson (2004, 2012) and Mielants (2007). The authors also refer to Blaut (1993), Goldstone (2009), Goody (2007) and Pomeranz (2000). Beyond the “California School”, the authors consistently refer to Abu-Lughod (1989) and Chakrabarty (2008) as key anti-Eurocentric historical works.

3 The key authors of Political Marxism that the authors refer consistently to are Brenner (1977, 1985), Lacher (2006), Teschke (2003) and Wood (2002a, 2002b).
was highly contentious, not least for its broader historiographical implications, and met strong criticisms from other Marxists (esp. World-Systems Theory). Jim Blaut (1994), for instance, condemned this thesis as falling into a “tunnel vision of history” typical of Eurocentric accounts.

The present book returns to this field of controversy by claiming that UCD can correct a slip towards Eurocentrism (Chapter 2). This lens, the authors argue, offers an appreciation of the geopolitical interconnectedness involved in the rise of capitalism, and brings into view how the conditions for capitalism were co-constituted internationally rather than produced endogenously in one society. Emerging from the unevenness and combination of a plurality of social forms, capitalism would have been incrementally constituted in an added-value process until it became “a single, causally integrated world-historical totality” (p.48). Pre-empting the criticism that such view would reproduce stagist, structuralist, and teleological assumptions, the authors emphasise their appreciation for agency. UCD, they claim, does not reproduce stagism but instead “presuppose[s] it in order to scramble, subvert, and transcend it” (p.58); it presupposes structure to see agency, it presupposes stagism to see contingency. In this way, they seek to synthesise the qualities of Political Marxism (an emphasis on agency) while transcending its problems (Eurocentrism and “specifism”).

Having set their theoretical stage, the authors then proceed to explore different moments in the longue durée story of the emergence of capitalism. Specifically, the authors engage with Mongolian influence on the establishment of long-distance trade in northern Italian city-states in the 12th century (Chapter 3); the geopolitical influence of the Ottoman Empire on western European kingdoms in the “long” 16th century (Chapter 4); the influence

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4 The main contenders were those dismissed by Brenner as advancing a “commercialisation model” fixated in long-distance trade. The authors refer recurrently to thinkers linked to this position, especially Arrighi (1994), but also Anderson (2013) and Braudel (1977).

5 In explaining the theory of “Uneven and Combined Development” the authors mostly refer directly to Trotsky’s writings. This provides the reader with a fresh and original engagement and re-articulation of the theory’s potential.
of Atlantic colonialism in transforming European societies and states (Chapter 5); the concept of bourgeois revolutions in Europe (Chapter 6); the influence of the Indian Ocean geopolitical setting in the development of Dutch colonialism (Chapter 7); and the geopolitical conditions enabling the British overtaking of the Mughal Empire (Chapter 8). As meets the eye, this selection of forays for a reinterpretation of the emergence of capitalism (and the West) is ambitious in its spatial, temporal and topical scopes. In this review, however, rather than addressing the empirical detail of these chapters, we have chosen to focus on the broader theoretical claims the book proposes—a reconceptualisation of capitalism and its involvement with geopolitics.

Historicising Capitalism: The Need for Specificity

A core claim in *How the West Came to Rule* is that a reconceptualisation of capitalism is necessary to appraise its global significance. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu criticize Political Marxists for their insistence on distilling the specific qualities of capitalist institutions. This position, they claim, minimizes capitalism’s geo-historical significance and does away with its complicity in colonial violence. Contrasting this, the authors seek to broaden their notion of capitalism whilst maintaining a commitment to historicism. Their alternative conception, however, constructs capitalism too loosely, turning it into a totality that inevitably subsumes everything under its horizon; an object of inquiry very difficult to historicise.

The authors define capitalism as “a set of configurations, assemblages, or bundles of social relations and processes oriented around the systematic reproduction of the capital relation, but not reducible—either historically or logically—to that relation alone” (p.23). This definition is presented as a transcendence of Political Marxism, which, according to the authors, reduces capitalism to the exploitation of waged labour (p.22-24). Such a narrow fixation is what confines the Political Marxist account of the origins of capitalism to the English countryside, where the regime of the enclosure distinctly led to the formation of large
farms that systematically employed waged labour (p.40). To counter such internalism, Anievas and Nişancioğlu emphasise the importance of “configurations and assemblages”, and stress that “the reproduction and competitive accumulation of capital through the exploitation of wage-labour presupposes a wide assortment of differentiated social relations that make this reproduction and accumulation possible” (p.23).

However, this argument is built upon a misreading of Political Marxism. Contra the authors’ claims, Political Marxists do not trace the development of capitalism to the emergence of waged labour, but to market imperatives—the pressures to systematically improve the productivity of labour. The reason why the emergence of capitalism is located in England is because there tenant farmers were forced to permanently improve the process of production to renew their access to the land. Paradoxically, the resulting forms of mixed farming were so productive that at first they required little inputs of waged labour; the dispossessed had to be absorbed by the cities and colonies of England instead (Žmolek 2013: 799). As Ellen Meiksins Wood puts it, the origin of capitalism “depended in the first instance not on the existence of a mass proletariat but on the existence of market-dependent tenant-producers” (2002a: 130). In short, *mass waged labour was a result of capitalist accumulation, not the other way around*. In missing this distinction, Anievas and Nişancioğlu misrepresent the arguments of Political Marxists and over-emphasise the role of waged labour in their conception of capitalism (see, for example, p.215).

This conceptual slippage has important ramifications for the rest of their narrative. The systematic use of wage-labour long predates the emergence of capitalism, even in the terms of the book’s broadened timeline. Why should we not trace the birth of capitalist accumulation to Ancient Rome? As in England, a landowning aristocracy appropriated the common lands (*ager publicus*), concentrated enormous estates at the expense of smallholders, and released an enormous mass of dispossessed population to the cities, which constituted the majority of the citizen body by the time Hannibal crossed the Alps (Anderson 2013:55-57).
Indeed, it is no coincidence that a student of Roman law like Karl Marx chose the Latin word *proletarii* to describe the new industrial working class. Of course, Roman estates were primarily farmed by slaves, but the systematic use of wage-labour was not uncommon in complex labour-intensive tasks. Landlords were aware that the proletarians, desperate to earn a living, were more disciplined than slaves, who had to be maintained by their owners (see Gardner and Wiedemann 1991:71). But given that waged labour has existed as far back as Mesopotamia, it could also be argued that instances of capitalist accumulation have existed since time immemorial, abolishing the question of “transition” altogether. The authors reproduce the same problem they criticise in the world-systems tradition: *a definition of capitalism so broad that it slips into infinite regression* (p.19).

Capitalism is not only stretched in time, but also across space. In Chapter 5, the practice of plantation slavery is described as “capitalist” because it relied on commercial circuits that were complicit in the reproduction of the capital relation elsewhere in the world (p.158). This suggests that anything that is geared towards the reproduction of the capital-wage labour relation, however remote along the value chain, is capitalist by extension. But as the logical chain goes on and on, the historical specificity of capitalist forms only becomes increasingly indistinguishable. Why capitalism should conceptually engulf other social forms of (re)production that predated it and co-existed alongside with it is never clearly explained. In fact, such an assumption seems to award *historical priority to capitalism*, something the authors note as a symptom of Eurocentrism elsewhere (p.33).

In the end, it is unclear when, where, and how capitalism begins and becomes a “world-historical totality”. In their attempt to bring the non-European to view, the authors introduce layer after layer of historical context in a way that buries causality. An example of this kind of reasoning is Chapter 3, which argues that capitalism could not have happened if the Mongols had not invaded centuries before (p.87). While certainly an important step in the path of European development, this is not an explanation of *why capitalism did eventually*
emerge in some areas of the continent. In Chapter 4 it is argued that agrarian capitalism flourished in England because Ottoman expansionism buffered the threat posed by the Habsburgs (p.116), but this begs the question of why it was developing there to begin with, rather than, say, Norway. Shifts in international power-balancing may have been important for the transition to take place, but their contribution remains indirect and ambiguous compared to domestic factors like the enclosure system. Despite the authors’ commitment to historicising agency, this insistence on privileging the conjunction, the necessary preconditions for an eventual outcome to take place, exudes a certain structuralism, as it suggests that the course of history is ultimately determined by macroscopic structural factors. The critical junctures, the contingent intersections that bend history in a given direction, are simply diluted into the background, where they disappear from view, void of agency.

The “Geopolitical”–A Productive Un-Specification?
For a book subtitled “The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism”, How the West Came to Rule is frustratingly imprecise in its usage of the term “geopolitics”. The authors, first stating that “the origins and history of capitalism can only be properly understood in international and geopolitical terms” (p.2), quickly disavow this claim by stating that “honesty compels us to admit that the subtitle of this book … is something of a misnomer” (p.12). Admitting that the label “intersocietal” or “international” would better fit their analyses, the authors defend their choice of geopolitics in that it allegedly brings violence and coercion to the forefront of the story (ibid.). For someone reading the book from the field of political geography, this woeful bypass of the concept comes as quite a disillusion. There is, after all, no lack of literature on conceptualising “geopolitics” (see, for example, Agnew 2003; Dodds 2005; Flint 2006). Nevertheless, in spite of its obvious undertheorisation of the term and tradition, How the West Came to Rule does engage in recurrent geopolitical arguments and may yet hold several provocations of interest to political geographers.
The authors define geopolitics/the geopolitical as: [i] “variegated processes and practices of communities, societies, and states occupying, controlling, socialising, organising protecting, and competing over territorial spaces and their inhabitant peoples and resources”; and [ii] “the multivalent forms of knowledge, discourses, representations, ideologies, and strategies, along with the articulations, modes, and relations of power generated from such processes” (p.10-11). Encompassing these two aspects allows one to examine the (re)production of human “territoriality” and “territorial spaces … as pivotal sites of contestation, change, and transformation” (p.11). This view of geopolitics, while not unsatisfying, is not clearly followed through in the book. Upon closer inspection, it would be more accurate to group the authors’ geopolitical arguments into three distinct motifs: [i] the drive for geopolitical accumulation derived from class struggle; [ii] the uneven and combined shaping of geopolitical space; and [iii] the geopolitical making of the territorial (capitalist) state. The combination of these three motifs makes for the claim that capitalism itself was a social form of reproduction precipitated by geopolitical change and chance.

The first motif is centred on the concept of “geopolitical accumulation”. The expression, as noted by the authors (p.31), originates in Political Marxist writings, in particular in the works of Wood (2003) and Teschke (2003). Derived from Brenner’s emphasis on “political accumulation”, the feudal forms of extra-economic wealth concentration (i.e. through increasing seigneurial reach), the term “geopolitical accumulation” captures the feudal drive in structuring international lordly competition through war and state-building. Through this prism, European political expansionism is recast as the result of a dominant class reproducing itself. For Political Marxists, the histories of early European colonialism, slavery, and state-making resulted from these pre-capitalist logics (p.31). The authors, albeit agreeing with the concept, reject this last step and seek to

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6 See especially pp.27-31 and pp.254-260. See also pp.102, 155, 186, 192, 232, 248 and 269.
understand a broader understanding of capitalism that is both constituted and constitutive of these experiences.

The second motif stems from UCD theory and coalesces around the idea of “geopolitical space”. Though the authors do not define this term, their usage of it is repeatedly connected to emphasising concepts such as “the whip of external necessity”, “the privilege of backwardness”, “penalties of progressiveness”, or “the gift of external opportunity” (p.43). Together these expressions form a vocabulary to argue how international constellations gave different societies privileged preconditions to develop by buffering them both structurally and spatially from the epicentres of geopolitical engagement. Indeed, it is by reference to this language that the authors claim that north-western Europe, and most of all England, would gather favourable conditions for development (see Chapters 4, 5 and 7). Two critical points are worth noting in respect to these two arguments. First, reflections on geopolitical space often appear connected in reference to “structural shifts” (p.121, 215). This privileges a god’s eye view of world politics rather than a more grounded attention to the situated geopolitical knowledges and projects of different actors. Second, the arguments on geopolitical space, though apparently related to actual spatial conditions, are shorn of ecological and environmental considerations; the constitutive role of materiality is mostly absent.

The third motif portrays the (European) territorial state as the crucial embodiment of a form of geopolitics that would lead to capitalist world hegemony. This argument sees a correspondence between geopolitical behaviour and a polity’s territorial/spatial form; an idea that comes fully into view in Chapters 5 and 8. Identifying the source of the territorial state in early Iberian colonialism, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu claim that the “territorially bounded state … was crucial to the subsequent bundle of processes that eventually led to Europe’s

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7 See especially Chapter 2. See also pp.72, 76, 94, 115, 120, 121, 143, 184, 193, 250, 260 and 274.
8 An argument which should not be accept uncritically (see Pal forthcoming).
ascendancy” by providing a “powerful (geo)political vehicle for the ‘endless’ accumulation of capital” (p.140). Here the authors seem to fall into Agnew’s (1994) famous “territorial trap” (see also Shah 2012) by reading modern European territoriality into the past and future as a source of inevitable ascendancy. Further complicating this hint of exceptionalism, the authors claim that the geopolitical behaviour of Western states was rooted in the specificity of their feudal relations of production (p.254-256).

Indeed, claims around the European territorial state as a geopolitical vehicle towards the global hegemony of capitalism seem at odds with the book’s non-Eurocentric aims. Significantly, the failure to overcome the hurdle of the political exceptionalism of the modern European state partially lays with the fact that the study, for all its claims for appreciating agency, understands the geopolitical more structurally than not. In the end, an understanding of the relation between “geopolitics” and “territoriality” can only be understood by a double reference to social forms of material (re)production (pp.260-261) and the historically contingent knowledge that social actors deploy to (geo)political effect (Agnew 2016). The lack of appreciation for the geopolitical as a distinct form of knowledge is all the more damming given that this is a crucial avenue in combatting Eurocentric historiography (see Mignolo 2002).

Despite this, the book succeeds in its crucial aim of bringing into view a grand history that decentres Europe and Europeans from their frequently reproduced “historical priority”. Though not without problems, the novel usages of the concept of the geopolitical open an unwitting invitation for political geographers to re-engage with the theoretical potential of the term, especially in relation to class and non-Eurocentric historiography. However, while the study takes the reader beyond the Eurocentric “tunnel of history”, it also focuses too much on conjunctural factors and could focus more meaningfully on critical junctures in order to

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9 This is all the more a missed opportunity in that Mignolo’s intervention was stimulated by an engagement with Wallerstein’s theories on the world history of capitalism.
appreciate agency—in and beyond Europe. Perhaps in doing so, the book would better explain the common roots of capitalism and Western rule.

References


Pal M (forthcoming) “My capitalism is bigger than yours”: Sovereignty, jurisdiction, and U&CD’s delusions. Historical Materialism


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