

International Relations, Historical Sociology and the Eurocentrism Debate

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Abstract

At the forefront of the burgeoning field of International Historical Sociology has been the effort to overcome Eurocentric conceptions of world history. This review article reconsiders the issue of Eurocentrism by critically engaging with Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu's *How the West Came to Rule*, which is the most recent and arguably one of the most sophisticated contributions to the anti-Eurocentric turn in International Relations. *How the West Came to Rule* provides a critique of Eurocentrism through a systematic inquiry into the question of the origin of capitalism. Despite its originality, I argue that the book remains hamstrung by a number of methodological issues, which ultimately undermine the authors' effort to go beyond the existing literature on Eurocentrism and provide a truly non-hierarchical international historical sociology. A clear specification of these problems, which haunt most anti-Eurocentric approaches to IR, provides us with the preliminary outlines of an alternative non-Eurocentric approach to world history.

Much work has been done to advance historical sociology as a critical approach to International Relations (IR). Through a sustained engagement with historical sociology, IR scholars have not only developed a deeper understanding of the socio-temporally changing character of international processes, thereby going beyond the 'timeless' and 'static' logic of 'anarchy', but have also asserted the relevance of international relations for processes conventionally explained through internal sociological factors such as nationalism, industrialization, revolution and democratization (Allinson and Anievas 2010; Dufour 2007; Halliday 1999; Hobson and Hobden 2002; Lacher 2006; Lapoint and Dufour 2012; Matin 2013; Morton 2007; Rosenberg 1994; Teschke 2003). Indeed, over the past decade, a new sub-field, 'international historical sociology' (IHS), has developed as part of such an endeavor to systematically theorize the social aspect of the international and the international aspect of the social (Rosenberg 2006). As such, IHS scholars have made an ontological intervention to both IR and Sociology, contributing to the formation of a 'common denominator for research in both' (Hobson et al. 2010: 4).

The IHS project has drawn upon a variety of theoretical schools and contributed to a variety of debates. Despite the theoretical and thematic diversity, however, one recurrent concern that has guided the IHS scholars in general is the critique of what may be called *methodological presentism* and *methodological internalism*. The former relates to the awareness that much social and international theory is pervaded by a mode of explanation that naturalizes and extrapolates back in time the structure and logic of the present international order. The critique of presentism is, in turn, firmly connected to the critique of 'methodological internalism'. For, by assuming the existence of autonomously and endogenously developing societies in history, 'internalist' models of development read back in time the hierarchies that constitute the present international system as well as perpetuate the false image of bounded societies (Hobson 2002; Rosenberg 2013). And indeed it is this combined critique of presentism and internalism that has put IHS at the center of attempts to develop a non-Eurocentric theorization of world history. John Hobson's pioneering works, for example, have been precisely such theoretical/historical endeavors to overcome the naturalization and transhistoricization of 'western' dominance in the international system, de-constructing the notion of 'western' superiority and priority by granting greater agency to the non-West in the constitution of the modern present (Hobson 2004; 2012).

In this article, I evaluate to what extent IHS has succeeded to fulfil the task it has set out for itself, namely to solve the problem of Eurocentrism on the basis of a non-presentist and non-internalist theorization of IR. I do so through a critical engagement with Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu's *How the West Came to Rule* (2015), which is the latest and arguably one of the most sophisticated contributions to the Eurocentrism debate in IR. The article begins by presenting the book's main thesis, with a special focus on the way in which the authors claim to depart from the existing non-Eurocentric literature. In section two, I argue that the book, despite its theoretical vigor and originality, falls back into a form of 'presentism' by reading back the logic and dynamics of the present economic order. As such, the book succumbs to what Karl Polanyi calls the 'economistic fallacy', i.e. a methodological error stemming from the equation of 'the human economy in general with its market form' (Polanyi 1977: 6). I demonstrate that the economistic fallacy not only causes the authors' narrative to founder on historical evidence, but also turns their attempt at overcoming Eurocentrism into a self-defeating exercise. In the conclusion, I briefly deal with the implications of this critique for future research.

How the West Came to Rule: Anti-Eurocentrism without the Economistic Fallacy?

How the West Came to Rule (HWCR) embraces the broad critique of 'presentism' and 'internalism', making a contribution to the growing international historical sociology literature by providing an 'internationalist' and non-Eurocentric reading of the origin of capitalism (63). According to Anievas and Nişancioğlu, 'the history of capitalism's origins is an unmistakably Eurocentric history'. For, 'dominant theorisations of early modern Europe have been constructed with non-European societies in absentia'. The image of an autonomously developing West has, in turn, relegated the non-Western world to mere victims or passive bystanders of 'European' capitalism (4). Ultimately, the role played by non-European societies in the genesis of capitalist modernity is overlooked. The authors thus seek to overcome Eurocentric accounts of the rise of capitalism by bringing in "extra-European" geopolitical conditions and forms of agency conducive to capitalism's emergence as a distinctive mode of production over the *longue durée*' (5-6). Through an examination of the non-European contributions to and geopolitical conditioning of the rise of 'European' capitalism, the book aims to reveal 'the relations of interconnection and co-constitution between "the West" and "the Rest" in their joint, if uneven, making of the modern world' (6).

At first sight, this project of incorporating non-Western agency in the origin of capitalist modernity seems to bear certain resemblances to the existing body of anti-Eurocentric literature in IR. John Hobson (2004), for example, labored the issue of Eurocentrism from a similar angle that stresses the 'contribution' of the non-Western world to the rise of Western civilization. In his view also, capitalism in the West would have never 'taken off' without the colonial resources and the diffusion and forceful appropriation of Eastern ideas (alongside more contingent and ideological factors such as the fortuitous conquest of the Americas and Europe's 'racist' collective identity) (Hobson 2004: 296-7). Likewise, the World System Theory (WST), as Anievas and Nişancioğlu acknowledge, shares the HWCR's 'internationalist' concerns, i.e. it pays particular attention to the role of 'peripheral' actors in sustaining the social relations in the capitalist 'core' (16). In a similar vein, post-colonial theory also seeks to reverse the theoretical and historical exclusion of the colonized world from the history of global capitalism, thereby criticizing the unqualified universalization of European forms and categories (e.g. Chakrabarty 2008).

Despite these similarities, however, Anievas and Nişancioğlu claim to depart from the existing literature in two important respects. They criticize post-colonial theory for its lack of engagement with the role of the non-European world in contributing to the

initial 'rise' of Europe itself, therefore, for presupposing 'a discrete and hermetically sealed European history in which modernity was created before being subsequently expanded globally' (40). Furthermore, they charge the 'internationalist' accounts informed by WST with 'holding to a neo-Smithian interpretation of capitalism as reducible to commerce', which 'results in a transhistorical extension, and thus a naturalization of capitalism's existence' (249, 224). They, therefore, contest the teleological view that capitalism is simply the outcome of the 'unimpeded' growth of (colonial) wealth, trade and commercial actors. They argue that although there were antecedent forms of 'capital' in history (which they equate to the wage-labor relation), 'capital' was 'subordinated to the non-capitalist social relations within which it existed, and could not posit itself as the condition of its own reproduction: that is, as self-valorising capital' (218). Therefore, one cannot presume the generalization of the wage-labor relation solely based on the accumulation of wealth and resources. Rather, a range of extra-economic measures was required for the emergence and sustenance of capitalism. In other words, '[t]he origins of capitalism is...a history that not only creatively generates a new social relation between capital and labour [by creating a mass of dispossessed workers], but also violently clears away, or appropriates, subsumes and subordinates other modes of power to the requirements of its own reproduction' (219). In this sense, 'capitalism' cannot be reduced to 'capital': the origins and development of capitalism presupposed 'a wide assortment of differentiated social relations that make [capital's] reproduction and accumulation possible' (9).

In short, Anievas and Nişancioğlu attempt to overcome Eurocentrism by combining the 'historical specificity' of the origins of capitalism with the wider inter-societal and extra-economic conditions shaping Europe's transition to capitalism (220, 246). It is especially in relation to the former argument where the Polanyian aspect of HWCR comes to the fore. For, Polanyi also argues against the uncritical equation of trade and exchange with capitalism. He contends that trade and profit-seeking action existed at all times, while serving different 'integrative' functions in different societies. To exemplify, in the presence of 'symmetrically arranged groupings', 'reciprocity' was the integrating principle that gave trade and production its particular logic, just as 'redistribution' was the principle that underlined economic action in the presence of an 'allocative center'. That said, for production and profit to become an end in itself, human economy has to be organized based on the idea of 'self-regulating' markets. These markets, which are governed by seemingly impersonal signals of demand and supply, emerged only when 'land and food were mobilized and labor was turned into a commodity free to be purchased in the market'. What was central to the rise of capitalism was therefore a political-institutional transformation that systematically forced and induced the elimination of non-market economic strategies. Only through a

political intervention into the rules governing social reproduction, were land and labor systematically commodified, and the economy organized according to the 'fiction' of self-regulating markets. The origin of capitalism, then, had nothing to do with 'mere random acts of exchange', i.e. the occasional sale of surplus product and labor. Instead, it required an 'institutional setup' aiming to increasingly commodify land and labor, thereby compelling and enabling the systematic improvement of the forces of production (Polanyi 1957a: 240; 1957b: 250-1, 255).

As such, Anievas and Nişancioğlu seem to have come some way in escaping the 'economistic fallacy'. They reject the uncritical equation of the economy with its market shape and reading back in time the logic of capitalist accumulation, which haunted extant approaches to Eurocentrism. Put another way, the authors concur with Polanyi that economic action is a historically-specific endeavor; i.e. there is no transhistorical compulsion to improve productive forces; and attributing a proto-capitalist character to social agents on *a priori* basis would lead to a misreading of the conditions of their organized existence. That said, however, Anievas and Nişancioğlu's historical narrative, in my view, eventually falls back into the 'economistic fallacy', hence presentism, which ultimately undermines their effort to overcome Eurocentrism. This is what I will discuss in the next section.

Beyond Presentism?: The Economistic Fallacy, Eurocentrism and the Homogenization of World History

What is central to HWCR is thus the proposition that 'capitalism' cannot be reduced to 'economy', instead, it encompasses social and political relations and processes that are 'non-identical with, subordinate to, and yet constitutive of the capital-wage labor relation' (221). Accordingly, the authors suggest that our understanding of the origins of capitalism has to 'move away from any singular history (say the freeing of labor in the English countryside) to investigate those wider –often international– developments that were coeval with the emergence of capitalism and which may have influenced or determined its very emergence' (221). HWCR tries to capture this spatially expanded history of capitalism's origins through the concept of 'uneven and combined development' (UCD). UCD, according to the authors, refers to 'the basic onto-relational texture of the historical process as a whole' (45). That is to say, geopolitical multiplicity, which is inherent in the condition of inter-societal difference, compels 'unevenly' developed societies to go beyond their own logic of social reproduction, forcing and inducing them to 'combine' foreign social relations and institutions with pre-existent ones. Through inter-societal interaction, less developed

societies learn from and assimilate the best aspects of more advanced societies. As a result, 'backwardness' turns into a 'privilege': less developed societies are enabled to selectively imitate and ultimately surpass more developed societies that are constrained by existing social structures. Viewed from this angle, the question as to why 'capitalism' first took root in Northwestern Europe and not elsewhere (with similar 'pockets of capitalist accumulation' such as Venice or Genoa) can only be explained by reference to a wide array of international interactions that provided the ultimate 'combined' momentum to Northwestern Europe to overcome its 'relative backwardness' and consolidate the path to capitalist modernity (221, 67). As such, capitalism was the 'combined' outcome of the interaction and contribution of multiple and 'unevenly' developed societies.

Guided by these theoretical pointers, Anievas and Nişancioğlu produce a historical narrative that emphasizes how various instances of West-East interaction acted as 'preconditions' for the emergence of capitalism in early modern Europe, particularly in England, the Netherlands and France (67). For example, in chapter 3, the authors argue that the 13th century Mongolian expansion and the resultant unification of the Eurasian landmass under Mongol rule revitalized intercontinental commercial linkages and urban sites, while facilitating the diffusion of the scientific inventions and military techniques of the advanced Asian societies to relatively backward Europe. Equally important, the Mongols caused the transmission of 'diseases' from the East to the West, thereby indirectly causing the demographic collapse of Western European populations (the 'Black Death'), which was central to the eventual development of capitalist social relations. For the demographic transformation brought about by the Black Death engendered a new balance of class forces and socio-institutional innovations that would facilitate the end of feudalism and the emergence of capitalist modernity. All combined,

'the Mongol Empire provided the propitious geopolitical conditions for the extensive development of market relations, trade, urban growth, and perhaps most importantly an increasingly complex division of labour in Western Europe – the latter constituting an integral aspect of the development of the productive forces. To be clear, this did not automatically entail the advent of capitalist relations of production, but it did provide the preconditions for their subsequent emergence' (75).

The Mongols' contributions to capitalism are followed by those of the Ottomans in chapter 4. The authors argue that by controlling the Mediterranean trade routes, the Ottoman Empire brought about a shift from Mediterranean to Atlantic trade, thereby unintentionally forcing and facilitating the emergence of the colonial Atlantic powers.

Furthermore, by waging almost constant warfare against the Habsburgs during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Ottomans prevented the unification of Europe under Habsburg rule, thereby unwittingly contributing to the geopolitical breathing space opened to England in advancing towards capitalism (93). Without the Ottoman pressure on the Habsburgs and Mediterranean trade routes, the English ruling class would not have been able to enjoy their isolation from continental wars, nor would the Northwestern European powers have been forced to initiate 'a developmental catch up' leading to colonialism and capitalism.

Even in this abbreviated historical narrative four severe problems can be detected in Anievas and Nişancioğlu's account. First, despite all the talk of the specificity of capitalism and rejection of the teleological explanations of capitalism's emergence, Anievas and Nişancioğlu's narrative reproduces the explanatory logic that troubles other non-Eurocentric scholars. That is, the authors' attempt to incorporate the Mongols and Ottomans in the origin of capitalism is predicated on the assumption of an already existing capitalist logic of action. For, only when a transhistorical motive to improve productive forces is presumed, the 'advanced' East can be argued to have provided the 'preconditions' (commercial networks, geopolitical pressure, scientific advancements and diseases) necessary for the emergence of capitalism. In other words, only when one assumes a necessary connection between commercial, demographic, technological factors on the one hand, and capitalism on the other, can international factors be deemed 'determinant' of and 'preconditions' for the transition to capitalism. Without such a presumption, for example, it would be very hard to argue that Northwestern Europe *as a whole* benefited from the 'privilege of backwardness', leaping towards capitalism, while other feudal 'pockets of capitalist accumulation' 'failed' to develop capitalism due to their differing relations with the Eastern powers.

Second, once capital is transhistoricized, a problematic understanding of causality prevails, which runs the risk of turning every past event into a necessary 'precondition' for the rise of capitalism. In other words, the economic fallacy, built into this mode of explanation, leads to transhistoricization and 'everything-ization' of the pre-conditions of capitalism's emergence. If we follow Anievas and Nişancioğlu in the literal sense, for example, one wonders if the migration, say of nomadic populations from Central Asia to Anatolia (who led to the formation of the early Ottoman state) could also be considered a 'precondition' for the rise of capitalism in England. In short, confusing temporal sequence with causality leads to a *post hoc* reasoning which, in turn, reinforces an ahistorical understanding of capitalism's origins, and *vice versa*. The teleological understanding of the rise of capitalism, combined with a relay-race conception of history, sneaks back into the authors' narrative, as they try to stretch

(spatially and temporally) the 'preconditions' of capitalism. Relatedly, given that capital is universalized and presumed to be there from the very beginning 'as a sporadic and isolated feature of history' (217), the authors end up instrumentalizing the 'international', hence the non-Western world, to fill in a preconceived framework of historical change (cf. Teschke 2011: 1102-3; 2015: 34-5).

Third, the authors' anti-Eurocentric strategy, i.e. overcoming Eurocentrism by claiming non-Western contributions to the rise of capitalist modernity, tends to impose an unwarranted homogeneity on the early modern world in and beyond Europe. This is especially the case once Anievas and Nişancioğlu move from the capitalist transition in England onto more controversial cases such as absolutist France. The authors take the existence of some agricultural wage labor, landless peasantry, commercial and manufacturing activity, and productivity growth (all which can be dated back to ancient societies) as indicators of a growing capitalist class in France, which is then used to claim how French colonialism (and thereby non-Western people) laid the foundations for a slowly yet surely developing capitalism in early modern France.

Immediately lost in this narrative is the fact that no matter how widespread the transhistorical indicators of capitalism were, all transitions to capitalism presuppose the establishment of what Polanyi calls 'institutionalized markets' to compel and induce economic action driven by a distinctive market rationality. Put differently, Anievas and Nişancioğlu fail to recognize that what is critical to the transition to capitalism is not the existence of wage labor, private property or dispossession *per se* (suggesting otherwise would simply collapse capitalism's consequences into its causes), but the generalization of a form of social relationship that is subsumed to the operation of the 'law of value'. For, all transitions to capitalism, in spite of spatio-temporal differences, assumed the transition to a socio-legal order that systematically enables and compels producers to transform the labor process according to the dictates of capitalist accumulation, i.e. increase the 'ratio of unpaid labor to paid' and decrease 'the socially necessary labor time involved in appropriating surplus value'.

Indeed, once we shift our focus from the transhistorical indicators to the historically-specific conditions of capitalist transition, early modern France appears in a totally different light. For one thing, in absolutist France the expropriation of land and growing landlessness (which manifested itself most notably in increasing 'sharecropping' arrangements) did not stem from and result in the systematic expropriation of customary rights and obligations (Parker 1996: 53; Beik 2009: 65; Gerstenberger 2007: 456; Brenner 1985: 313). There was no change in the rules for accessing land; agrarian production and prices continued to be bound by the subsistence requirements of

peasant holdings even in large estates (Brenner 1985: 313; Comninel 1987: 189-90; Miller 2012: 153-4). Furthermore, there was no socio-institutional mobilization of land, labor and credit, that could have forced, enabled and permitted peasant family units and big landlords to produce competitively, reorganize production, release labor and accumulate land in the face of their less competitive neighbors (cf. Friedman 1980; Post 2013). As a result, although advanced labor-saving techniques and methods existed in France, their 'diffusion' remained very limited despite the considerable efforts made by both state elites and scientists (Briggs 1991: 86; Beik 2010: 120). Increases in agricultural output resulted from the growth of population and extension of existing modes of exploitation, not capitalist development. Unsurprisingly, in the absence of an organized and system-wide political intervention into the prevailing property relations, ruling class incomes were, by and large, based on agricultural rents and acquisition of venal offices, rather than the control and systematic improvement of the organization of production. Relatedly, despite increases in manufacturing output, there was no attempt to exercise capitalist control over the labor process in the factories (LaFrance 2013: 129-34). Economic policies in early modern France, which involved protectionist, regulatory and colonial measures, were much less about encouraging the transformation of the conditions of production and underpricing of rivals, than of direct political/military control of markets. Tariffs and subsidies eventually degenerated into mere fiscal and redistributive devices (Parker 1996: 44-5; De Vries 1976: 250-1). Private property, accumulation of (colonial) wealth and landless peasantry certainly predated the rise of capitalism in early modern France, but neither of them presupposed capitalist property and capitalist accumulation within itself as a developmental tendency. Quite the contrary, for capitalist property to develop, the dominant forms of private property, either in the form of commercial/manufacturing monopolies or sharecropping arrangements, would have to cease to be the main source of private appropriation (Gerstenberger 2007: 27).

The obvious implication is that uneven and combined development, underlined by a transhistorical motive to improve productive forces and the effort to show the non-European 'contributions' to the rise of capitalism, ends up obscuring the multi-linearity of historical development within Europe itself. This crying error finally brings us to the last, and perhaps the most debatable aspect of *How the West Came to Rule*. Behind the authors' uncritical assimilation of absolutist France into 'capitalism' rests the assumption that the non-Western world is important only insofar as its 'contribution' to the (imagined) origins of capitalism. Besides being normatively problematical, such an argument points to the existence of an analytical dead-end in the authors' narrative, exposing an inherent inability to deliver a truly non-hierarchical world history. That is, no matter how the authors try to overcome Eurocentrism, either by emphasizing the

non-Western 'contributions' to European technologies and institutions or capitalism's non-Western 'geopolitical determinations', the only way for Anievas and Nişancioğlu's argument to be truly non-Eurocentric is by showing that everyone 'equally' conditioned or contributed to the *origin* of capitalism. Given the impossibility of such a task, the authors' narrative is bound to produce 'deviant' historical cases. Therefore, although the authors increase the number of regions/areas, which they consider 'contributed' to the origin of capitalism, they inevitably reproduce hierarchical readings of world history. They offer a non-Eurocentric history only by creating new spatial hierarchies.¹ Relatedly, by trying to narrate an *all-inclusive* history of the transition to capitalism, i.e. a narrative purporting that everyone 'contributed' or 'could have contributed' to the rise of capitalism, non-Eurocentric accounts reproduce perhaps the most Eurocentric assumption that capitalism represents a superior and better mode of organizing human relations, so that everyone must have contributed to its rise (Wood 2001: 32). Radical as it may seem, anti-Eurocentrism, as such, turns into a self-defeating exercise.

Conclusion

Two broad implications for a truly 'historical' and non-Eurocentric international historical sociology transpire from this discussion (cf. Lawson and Hobson 2008). First, a fuller understanding of the internationally conditioned and multi-linear character of world historical development depends firmly on our ability to overcome the economic fallacy (Lacher 2015). The failure to do so not only reads capitalism back into history, turning it into something ready to burst forth simply as the forces of production or commerce advance, but also considerably impoverishes our conception of international interactivity and heterogeneity. The 'international', without overcoming the economic fallacy, imprisons our imagination of international hybridity and multiplicity in an all-absorbing conception of capitalism. A deeper understanding of the 'generative' nature of the international (which is one of the main promises of IHS) is occluded by an ever-present capitalism. Second, without overcoming the 'economic fallacy', theorizing an anti-Eurocentric IHS is bound to remain a stillborn attempt. For, pondering the problem of geo-spatial differentiation in terms of the transhistorical preconditions of capitalist development inevitably reproduces hierarchical readings of world history, and leads to the forced homogenization of the highly variegated international developmental paths.

If documenting the non-Western 'contributions' to capitalism proves to be a counter-productive exercise, the first step to overcoming Eurocentrism must be to conceptualize the origin of capitalism away from its transhistorical precursors. In other words, for a truly non-Eurocentric IHS, we need to challenge the view that capitalism emerged once certain European, non-European or universal human

resources/technologies/abilities accumulated. Only when we develop such an alternative approach to IHS that systematically sterilizes the origins and rise of capitalism from teleological assumptions, can we step out of the Eurocentric cage.

The implication is that the critique of internalism, without a proper critique of presentism, falls short in advancing an effective critique of Eurocentrism. In other words, IHS fails to deliver a non-Eurocentric theory, precisely because it does not sufficiently abide by the methodological and ontological underpinnings of the original IHS project. Above all, then, what is needed for a truly 'historical' international historical sociology is a method that thinks in *real historical time*. This is a method that advances the critique of internalism while completely dispensing with presentism rooted in the economic fallacy, i.e. the view that the 'economic' is driven by a transhistorical capitalist rationality. This is to say, the way out of the Eurocentric dead-end rests *not* on the rather fruitless addition of another case study said to have somehow contributed to the rise of capitalism, but challenging the view that capitalism is a natural and necessary category of human development, growing out of pre-existent social patterns. Saving IR from its own ahistorical and Eurocentric theorizing is thus closely linked to its ability to reassert both the historical specificity of capitalism's emergence and (geo)political genesis of its development. A full discussion of this alternative approach to Eurocentrism falls beyond the scope of this review essay.²

Notes

¹ I owe this argument to Hannes Lacher, personal communication, 2009.

² For a step in this direction, see Duzgun (forthcoming).

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