

# Introduction: Book Symposium on 'How the West Came to Rule': Why the Disavowal of Eurocentrism is Insufficient

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This is an important book on an important topic; the significance of the issues it raises are attested to by the vigour of the responses it has generated. It is hard to dislodge longstanding disciplinary formations and sometimes difficult to see how they continue to operate even when being disavowed. It is especially difficult when disciplinary formations are associated with canonical figures, such as Weber or Marx. From at least the time that Weber first set out the need to account for the 'world historical' significance of the 'Rise of the West', social scientists have been focused on variants of that question – from normative attempts to account for the 'miracle of Europe' to, more descriptively, seeking to account for the 'miracle *in* Europe'. Both forms of the question, however, maintain an exceptionalism of the West as something that needs explanation in its own terms, thereby incorporating Eurocentrism into the understanding of the 'capitalist modernity', which was the very 'world historical' outcome that Weber believed to be bequeathed by Europe.

Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu offer an alternative to that question by seeking to understand how the West came to rule. They take on board postcolonial and other critiques of European exceptionalism by organising their response around the 'extra-European' geopolitical conditions and forms of agency that they see as associated with capitalism's emergence. The assumption at the very outset, however, is that the West came to rule as a consequence of the emergence of capitalism and that its emergence was also associated with aspects of history in other places. While drawing on the work of postcolonial critics and scholars who have long made the argument for 'provincializing Europe' (see, for example, Hall 1992, Chakrabarty 2000, Dirlik 2003) their use of such critique seems to be more an attempt to rescue the theoretical framework to which they are committed – that of uneven and combined development – than to take the critique on its own terms and see what theory of capitalism might emerge as a consequence.

Specifically, it is difficult to see how the drawing in of histories located in other places to make sense of what happened in Europe truly escapes the charge of

Eurocentrism that is otherwise presented as being under critique. After all, it is the incorporation of others into the organising drive of European capitalism that is their concern and not a rethinking of the meaning of capitalism in the light of hitherto unanalysed connections. Development remains a specifically European contribution with consequences on others as part of its conditions. As such, Eurocentrism is perhaps more easily disavowed in their account than avoided. As I have argued elsewhere (Bhambra 2007), we need to address the relationship of history and historiography within social scientific accounts of modernity (or capitalist modernity) in order to examine how these structure Eurocentred grand narratives through their continual privileging of a particular European history over the 'connected histories' (Subrahmanyam 1997) that produced the modern world. Standard histories of capitalism, or of the rise of the modern world, tend to chart its beginnings in processes located within Europe that eventually spread out over the world. In this way, the world comes to be configured by Europe and European processes associated with modernity such that scholars, including the authors of this book, feel able to talk unproblematically about 'European capitalism'. If, as they suggest at different points in the book, events in other parts of the world as well as European colonial activities across the world are constitutive of developments identified in Europe, this begs at least two questions. First, how does one understand developments in other parts of the world such that they are not simply subsumed into a European narrative or theoretical framework; and second, if the global is so significant, what is the basis of continuing to understand these developments as 'European' capitalism? If a theory of capitalism precedes (and supersedes) the historical analysis, then what purpose is that history serving?

An approach that acknowledges the epistemological value and agency of peoples and events beyond Europe would also seek to rethink its initial paradigms and concepts on the basis of taking into account what has been newly learnt. If this is not done, then it would appear that the focus on events elsewhere is just window-dressing for the maintenance of a theory that already supplies the answers before history is even engaged with. Whereas the critique of Eurocentrism, as made by Anievas and Nişancioğlu themselves, often rests on the 'writing out' of colonialism and the histories of other parts of the world, it also takes its force from social scientific accounts that subordinate events, peoples, and processes elsewhere to confirming or denying the validity of a theoretical account that is already based on an unacknowledged Eurocentred history. There is a methodological assumption at work here that rests on the believed 'undeniability' of particular 'facts' – namely, that Europe is the origin of particular processes, even if events and peoples in other places provided the conditions for those developments – such that even if it is accepted that 'Eurocentrism' is inappropriate as a methodological assumption, the fact of *European* capitalism cannot

be denied. However, in earlier work (Bhambra 2007, 2011), I have addressed these very facts to show that they *can be challenged* and that, moreover, a different kind of historical sociological approach – one oriented to interconnections (Bhambra 2014) – would provide the basis for different understandings (see also Shilliam 2009, 2010).

The underlying assumptions of 'uneven and combined development' come from a linear stadial theory which seeks to accommodate 'difference' within a universal framework. The problem with this is that it has no space for colonialism as a part of the development of unevenness. The 'unevenness' in 'uneven and combined' is presented as a consequence of the modes of production *internal* to societies, not a consequence of relations between societies as constitutive of what are presented as separate stages. The intersocietal approach that Anievas and Nişancioğlu seek to apply in this volume maintains the direction of historical causality from the world beyond Europe to Europe. The differences they identify are presented as external to capitalism and as providing the broader geopolitical conditions for the development of capitalism within Europe; they do not modify the story that provides the unacknowledged underpinnings for the emergence of that understanding of capitalism. In contrast, the argument that I have made in developing the approach of 'connected sociologies' is that the issue is not simply one of a failure to extend the range of analysis or the number of examples. Rather, what is needed is an analytical approach that structures the 'inclusion' of any new, additional objects, such that they work also towards the (re)construction of pre-existing understandings by providing new interpretations, explanations, and solutions in the process. Some of these issues are also picked up by the scholars in the review symposium.

Inayatullah and Blaney focus, in particular, on the explicit politics that underpin the arguments made by Anievas and Nişancioğlu and question whether their politics do not override the historical and theoretical claims otherwise being made. They also examine the understanding of capitalism at the heart of the analysis being put forward by contrasting it with the analyses of Ellen Wood and Dipesh Chakrabarty as proxies for different Marxist positions. As Inayatullah and Blaney suggest, it is not clear what is added to the analysis through the commitment to uneven and combined development that would not also be present through a general relational understanding of histories as connected. While Inayatullah and Blaney address the (Marxist) politics animating the arguments in *How the West came to Rule*, the reviews by Duzgun and Zarakol take on the claims by Anievas and Nişancioğlu to offer a non-Eurocentric contribution to the wider debates.

Eren Duzgun, in his analysis, centres Anievas and Nişancioğlu's claim to overcome Eurocentred world histories and examines the extent to which they achieve this objective. Their wish to include histories from other places works primarily to strengthen the arguments of the specificity of European capitalism and, as such, according to Duzgun, is able to 'offer a non-Eurocentric history only by creating new spatial hierarchies'. Zarakol also picks up on the issue of Eurocentrism and asks whether Anievas and Nişancioğlu's account manages to address it effectively. She asks, for example, whether continuing to put Europe at the heart of the analysis – with historical accounts from elsewhere feeding into the primary account of Europe – does not reinforce Eurocentrism rather than mitigate against it. While both authors present strong critiques of the extent to which Anievas and Nişancioğlu manage to overcome Eurocentrism in their own arguments, they nonetheless agree that the scholarship is exemplary and requires engagement more broadly.

In his review, Eric Mielant takes the authors to task for their apparent failure properly to understand 'world systems theory', which is relabeled 'world systems analysis'. Mielant suggests that while the critique of Orthodox Marxism is warranted, world systems analysis has, however, already engaged with the world beyond the West in the formulation of its particular positions and, as such, the critique ought not to be made also of this position. Mielant also questions the efficacy of the term 'intersocietal', with which Anievas and Nişancioğlu seek to replace 'world system', and is perplexed by their failure to examine the 'other side' of the historical connections between the 'West and the rest' that they otherwise point to as significant.

The reviews collected together here are generous in their engagement with the arguments made in the book, critical about some of the claims put forward, and comprehensive in their overall responses. They provide an excellent starting point for engaging with the book itself, but are no substitute for the book. The issues highlighted here are simply the beginning! No doubt the book will generate debate and discussion across the political spectrum and from a variety of theoretical positions. It is a necessary debate and the authors are to be congratulated for provoking it in such a forceful and extensive manner.

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