

The Costs of Weaponizing Emancipatory Politics: Constituting what is Constitutive of Capitalism

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Introduction

Scholarly learning often challenges one's politics. For example, we wanted to diagnose the ills of capitalism so we turned to Marx. In his work we found a profound critique but also an appreciation of capitalism's progressive credentials. Indeed, we now believe it is Marx's generosity to capitalism that allows his deep diagnosis.¹ In modern society, Marx claims, humans individuate themselves within a system that constitutes them as legal equals and constructs a sphere of individual freedom. Simultaneously, capitalism expands and differentiates needs while producing material capacities that satisfy those needs (Marx 1973: 156, 241-3, 496). These possibilities are linked to capitalism's greatest achievement: a process of expanded wealth production. As Marx puts it, "Capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labor beyond its natural paltriness, and thus creates the material elements for the development of a rich individuality, which is the as all-sided in its production as in its consumption" (Ibid: 325). Yet the promise of rich individuality is thwarted where "this complete working out of the human content appears as a complete emptying out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing down of all limited one-sided aims as the sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end" (Ibid: 488). That external end is capital accumulation. Here, Marx strikes a delicate balance. His critique is ruthless, but his analysis is nuanced: the gains associated with capitalism are real relative to past social formations but they are limited by the organization of capitalism itself and bought only dearly.

So our first indication that something might be awry in *How the West Came to Rule* is that we search in vain for a complexity whereby Anievas and Nişancioğlu recognize capitalism's achievements and positive consequences. Instead, capitalism appears as a source of all-round immiseration and oppression, extending well beyond the confines of what Marx saw as capitalism's specific form of wealth production. Late in the book, by way of summary, they indict capitalism as little more than "conquest, ecological ruin, slavery, state

terrorism, patriarchal subjugation, racism, mass exploitation and immiseration." Just to be clear, they stress that these elements of our violent past are constitutive of capitalism's very nature (Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015: 279; hereafter just page numbers). Marx's formulation of the historical purpose that capitalism serves seems purged in their analysis. Of course, Anievas and Nişancioğlu might respond that it is precisely the idea that capitalism might offer advantages relative to other social formations that they wish to avoid.

We can trace their disinclination to grant capitalism its due to their contemporary political commitments. Anievas and Nişancioğlu (281-2) end *How the West Came to Rule* with a solution to the problem of "political multiplicity" faced by Marxist praxis that attempts "to negate and sublate" varying oppressions and struggles "into the unity and singularity of revolutionary thought and practice" organized around wage-labor and the industrial proletariat. Such a praxis deploys "internalist" and Eurocentric methods that explain the development of social forms on the basis of internal processes alone (7). Their book resists "any politics that takes a singular—historically and geographically specific—experience and generalizes beyond its own spatiotemporal conditions and limitations." Eurocentric accounts of the rise of capitalism, including Marx's own, are a primary target and justly so.² Though they mention that future struggle has to have a global character (279) so as to parallel the global character of capitalism's uneven and combined processes of development, they emphasize that their "theoretical and historical observations" provide "a way of integrating into the critique of capitalism an array of social relations that have too often been dismissed as 'externalities'—non-waged work, forced work, illegal work, state coercion, patriarchy, racism and so on" (281). The problem they highlight parallels the problem with "internalist" explanations: these multiple "forms of oppression" are reduced into "the singular relation embodied in wage-labor" or given secondary status, attributing "a false, homogenous universality onto the many, variegated struggles against oppression" (281). Anievas and Nişancioğlu imply that resisting the "false, homogenous universality" of Eurocentric "internalist" explanations of capitalist development is connected intimately to revealing and understanding the multiplicity of forms of oppression and struggle.

Our concern is that the internalism of Eurocentric methods is conflated with the internalist emphasis on how the wage-labor relationship constitutes capitalism. Though they can be connected, these are not the same issue. Eurocentrism is spatial and the emphasis on the wage-labor relation is

categorical. The former is about how we demarcate spatially the story of the development of capitalism. The latter is about determining capitalism's specificity. Deploying uneven and combined development as a frame may help us see "the ways in which the multiple social relations of oppression and exploitation, each originating from a variety of different vectors of social historical development, combine and intersect with each other" (282), but we do not need this broader historical/geographical frame to "uncover" multiple forms of oppression. We do not need a non-Eurocentric story of capitalist development to raise the categorical issue about capitalist social relations and non-waged work, forced labor, patriarchy and racism: these are present in the narrow space of the West and can be accessed without much of a sense of capitalism's history beyond the present. Anievas and Nişancioğlu understand that they are joining separable issues in their re-working of Marxist analysis (8-9), but we believe the urgency of their final political message generates the need to merge the two.

Our goal here is to separate the two issues and focus on the difficulties the categorical issue poses for Anievas and Nişancioğlu. We think something is amiss in *How the West Came to Rule* to ambiguities in Anievas and Nişancioğlu's conception of capitalism. In brief, Anievas and Nişancioğlu embrace an expanded conception of capitalism that incorporates an array of forms of domination and oppression as historically important for the rise of capitalism and thereby *constitutive* of capitalism. This embrace steers them away from, though without completely rejecting, a narrower conception of the specificity of capitalist relations as exploitation of abstract labor-power. In this way, they work to unseat the *primacy* of waged labor and its struggles and embrace a broader conception of capitalism as historically constituted by multiple and varied forms of oppression. These moves lead the text to an anti-capitalist "transformative emancipatory politics" (279) but at the cost of muddying the issue of what constitutes capitalism. We see this muddying as central to the text: the expanded understanding of capitalism unifies their historical narrative and lends necessity to a common anti-capitalist mission underlying the multiple struggles of the present. Yet it remains unclear whether their version of the historical constitution of capitalism supports contemporary anti-capitalist movements.

Difference, Unity and the Middle Path

Anievas and Nişancioğlu tightly link their “transformative emancipatory” project to theoretical and historical work that challenges what they perceive as the Eurocentrism of most prior analyses of capitalism. Specifically, they chart a middle path between explanations that: (1) are “sociological” or internal versus those that are “geopolitical,” “intersocietal,” or external; (2) are conjectural and whose ontology is flattened versus those that are structural and determinist; and (3) emphasize class exploitation versus those that also recognize, for example, race- and gender-based oppressions (249-53). They believe that charting this middle path between internal and external and structural and contingent accounts achieves their primary goal: to negate European exceptionalism and restore to Marxist analysis a broader geographical reach. They write that, “as our argument has...shown, the revisionists are correct in arguing that there is nothing endogenous about Europe’s cultural, socio-economic and political development that necessarily led it on the path to global pre-eminence” (246).

Nevertheless, Anievas and Nişancioğlu find a problem with these “revisionists,” namely, their “conjectural mode of analysis” produces a flat ontology (249). Anievas and Nisancioglu mean that the revisionists, in their eagerness to de-center Europeans, “wash away important differences between the European and non-Western social structures in explaining the advent of capitalism and modernity” (249). Denying differences makes it “difficult – if not impossible” to explain “divergences in developmental trajectories” (249). Their quote of Joseph Bryant illuminates the problem:

The conundrum is inescapable: a world flattened of determinant social differences makes the local emergence of any historical novelty structurally inexplicable, and restricts explanatory options to conjectures aleatory or incidental. (Bryant 2006: 418; emphasis original; quoted on 249)

To escape the conception of a flattened world, Anievas and Nişancioğlu need differences. Not so finely grained as to make Europe exceptional. And not so flattened as to make impossible explanations that differentiate between geopolitical spaces. They also need a singular force, namely capitalism, to explain “a unified conception of sociohistorical development” (253). The basis for their explanation and the source of our critique is *how* they combine differences (the many) with unity (the one).

They combine difference and unity to provide an admirable complexity and nuance in their historical accounts that even careful readers may miss if attuned only to their broader analytic and political frame.³ To their credit, despite their efforts to decenter Europe, Anievas and Nicancıoğlu provide Europe its *differentia specifica*: Europe possesses qualities that are unique to it (10, 254). Nevertheless, their profound insight is that these qualities were produced “intersocietally”. We regard the following quote as the punch line of their book:

We have seen how Europe’s ‘unique’ developmental trajectory out of feudalism and into capitalism, leading to its subsequent rise to global pre-eminence, was fundamentally rooted in and conditioned by extra-European structural determinations and agents. It was then the combination of these multiple spatiotemporal vectors of uneven development that explains the so-called European ‘miracle.’ (259)

And then we get this succinctly elegant claim, “the overall conditions of uneven and combined development emanat[ed] from both *within and without* Europe” (259). Later they record the echoing implication: “In these ways, the ‘decline of the East’ and ‘rise of the West’ were *mutually conditioning* and *co-constitutive* processes, where one state’s gain is turned into another’s loss” (272).⁴ All this is to the good.

As noted earlier, however, the spatial and categorical claims are conflated: decentering Europe means, for Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, also decentering the formal exploitation of wage labor as the center of capitalism. In their words,

An exclusive focus on the English countryside tends to privilege the formation of the capital-wage labor relation in agrarian capitalism. In contrast, we have argued that although this waged sphere is indeed *fundamental*, it is itself dependent on a variety of different social relations that are irreducible to that sphere alone. (278; emphasis added)

For our purposes, we will want to keep in mind the weight placed on the word “fundamental.” We will ask below what is or is not fundamental about the “waged sphere.” For Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, the contrast between the “waged sphere” with “nonwaged labor regimes” is also a relation or a site of connection:

Vast assemblages of *nonwaged labor regimes* – from debt peonage to plantation slavery, from Banda to Barbados – formed the foundational basis on which the (re)production of wage-labor and capital in London and Amsterdam was built. (278)

Here, we note the appearance of *two* foundations: the waged-sphere but also how that sphere is foundationally based in “nonwaged labor regimes” such as debt peonage and slavery. Capitalism, Anievas and Nişancioğlu insist therefore, does not just exploit, it also oppresses:

capitalism utilizes exploitation and oppression – beyond the formally free exchange of labor-power for wages – as resources for its reproduction. The violence that inheres in forms of exploitation such as slavery, debt peonage and domestic labor, practices such as state coercion, ‘just wars’ and territorial division, and structures of racism and patriarchy is not external to capitalism as a mode of production, but *constitutive of its very ontology*. (278)

The attentive reader begins, here, to glimpse how Anievas and Nişancioğlu’s commitments to a contemporary “transformative and emancipatory” politics shape their book, sending them, in our view, into some choppy theoretical waters. The first question we might want to ask is what do they mean by “constitutive of [capitalism’s] very ontology”? But we are not quite there yet.

Allow us instead to turn quickly to Anievas and Nişancioğlu’s politics. They are keen to negate capitalism’s progressive credentials:

The history of violence upon which the social relations of capitalism were built should lead us to question the idealized self-image of capitalism as a world of expanding fulfillment and freedom, achieved through the abstract mechanisms of exchange. (278-9)

Though Marx also challenged the idealization of capitalism by bourgeois economists, do they mean to reject Marx’s analysis of formal equality, freedom, and individuality as the basis of exchange, including his assessment that these are partial achievements? Such a rejection appears to serve the greater cause of incorporating into capitalism “patriarchy, race, and so on” (279) and serve as the basis for “transformational emancipatory” struggles.

On the face of things this seems a laudable goal since our contemporary condition demands no less. In a long passage, part of which we quoted earlier, they conclude:

The conquest, ecological ruin, slavery, state terrorism, patriarchal subjugation, racism, mass exploitation and immiseration upon which capitalism was built continue unabated today. The violent past explicated in this book was therefore not merely a historical contingency, external to the ‘pure’ operation of capital, or a phase of ‘incompleteness’ out of which capitalism has emerged or will emerge.

Rather, these practices and processes are 'constitutive' in the sense that they remain crucial to capitalism's ongoing reproduction as a historical social structure. (279)

We may note a few things about this bold and committed position. First, it expands the exploitative/oppressive range of capitalism. Experiences beyond the industrial proletariat and forms of oppression beyond the wage-labor relationship are acknowledged and made central to the story. Second, we can sense a slight backing away or softening of their claim. They could have said that patriarchy, racism (and so on) are crucial to capitalism's social structure. But instead they say it is crucial to its "historical structure." This modification leaves some doubt about the necessity of these elements to capitalism's ontology and, presumably, their centrality in the future of contemporary struggles. Still, most important, and third, they bind to capitalism the following elements as 'constitutive': "conquest, ecological ruin, slavery, state terrorism, patriarchal subjugation, racism, mass exploitation and immiseration". Much turns, as we suggested above, on what Anievas and Nisancıoğlu mean by "constitutive."

Their chapter 1 provides the most detailed account of how these non-waged labor elements "constitute" capitalism. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu present this issue as it emerges from problems they have with "Political Marxists" who, with their emphasis on class exploitation, exclude too much of what else goes on in capitalism:

Politically, there is much at stake in this. The externalization of 'extra-economic forms of exploitation and oppression from capitalism ultimately leads Political Marxists to exclude the histories of colonialism and slavery from the inner works of the capitalism production mode. They argue instead that such practices were rooted in the feudal logic of geopolitical accumulation. While we would not go so far as to say that Political Marxists ignore colonialism and slavery per se, they do nonetheless absolve capitalism of any responsibility for these histories. (31)

Based on these observations, they take Ellen M. Wood to task: "In a critique of 'diversity, "difference", and pluralism", Wood argues, for example, 'that gender and racial equality are not in principle incompatible with capitalism...although class exploitation is constitutive of capitalism...gender or race inequality are not'." Anievas and Nişancıoğlu emphatically reject Wood's claim by saying, "These are difficult claims to sustain empirically" (31).

Resorting to empirics, however, cannot clinch the argument. Even a sympathetic reader might dismiss their claims as a resort to a kind of positivism

that we presume they reject. At the very least we want to anticipate how Ellen Wood might respond to this dismissal.

Ellen Wood's Response (as we imagine it) and the Constitution of Capitalism

Ellen Wood comments on the contemporary condition by referencing some of the same elements of oppression/exploitation that Anievas and Nişancioğlu take up. She refers to these – “gender-emancipation, racial equality, peace, ecological health, democratic citizenship” – as “extra-economic goods” (1988: 4). She claims that while “the socialist project of class emancipation” has always been committed to these goals, she seeks a more refined analysis and asks: “What kinds of oppression does capitalism require, and what kinds of emancipation can it tolerate? In particular, what use does capitalism have for extra-economic goods, what encouragement does it give and what resistance does it put up to their attainment?” (1988: 4)

Wood wonders whether “racial or gender equality are antagonistic to capitalism, or that capitalism cannot tolerate them” (1988: 5). On the one hand, she asserts that capitalism is “uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits” (1988, 5). She explains that the “extraction of surplus value from wage-laborers takes place in a relationship between formally free and equal individuals and does not presuppose differences in juridical or political status (1988: 5). She claims further that

there is a positive tendency in capitalism to *undermine* such differences, and even to dilute identities like gender or race, as capital strives to absorb people into the labor market and to reduce them to interchangeable units of labor abstracted from any specific identity. (1988: 5-6)

On the other hand, she is well aware that capitalism is flexible enough to take advantage of whatever social oppression it may find; it “is likely to co-opt whatever extra-economic oppressions are historically and culturally available (1988: 6).

Having conceded this, Wood stresses that capitalism's opportunism is due not to “any structural tendency in capitalism towards racial inequality or gender oppression” (1988, 6). And then she states what Anievas and Nişancioğlu appear to emphatically reject:

capitalist exploitation can in principle be conducted without any consideration for color, race, creed, gender, any dependence upon extra-economic inequality or difference; and more than that, the development of capitalism has created ideological pressures against such inequalities and differences to a degree with no precedent in pre-capitalist societies. (1988: 6; see also 1990: 76)

In contrast, the “disappearance of class,” she claims in a 1990 article, “would by definition mean the end of capitalism” (1990, 76). Thus, she concludes, “class exploitation is *constitutive* of capitalism as gender and or racial inequality are not” (1990: 76, emphasis original). There is that word again, “constitutive.” We mark its appearance here in order to return to it below.

Wood ends by saying, “capitalism subjects all social relations to its requirements” (1990: 76). But we do not find her conclusion convincing on its own. Could it not be argued that patriarchy or white supremacy, for example, also “subject all social relations to its requirements”? Is it not possible that after the dissolution of class, we might still have racism and sexism? Wood argues for capitalism as a “totalizing” force (1990: 65, 66). But feminists might argue the same for patriarchy and critical race theorists for white supremacy. In our reading, it would be more precise to say that the real *differentia specifica* of capitalism is its particular form of dynamism. The totalizing capacity of capitalism is enhanced by how it necessarily endogenizes innovation and technological change to its own logic and circuit—its own ‘ceaseless striving’ to produce wealth, as we quoted Marx above. “All that is solid melts into air” not just because capitalism is a uniquely totalizing force but because its totalizing is hyper-dynamic.

Thus, returning to gender issues, Wood asserts, capitalism “is no more incapable of tolerating gender equality than of accepting the National Health Service or social security” (1988: 8). And, “[a]lthough capitalism can and does make ideological and economic use of gender oppression ... this oppression has no privileged position in the structure of capitalism” (1988: 8). Wood then delivers a compelling implication:

Capitalism could survive the eradication of all oppressions specific to women as women – while it would not, by definition, survive the eradication of class exploitation. This does mean that capitalism has made the liberation of women necessary or inevitable. But it does mean that there is no *specific* structural necessity for, nor even a strong systematic disposition to, gender oppression in capitalism. (1988: 8)

Indeed, Wood insists that the formal equality and freedom that is a pre-condition for the operation of markets, often work to weaken patriarchal principles:

Where feudalism operated through a relation between lord or state and the *household*, mediated through the male, capital strives for direct and immediate relations with *individuals*, male or female, who from the point of view of capital take on the identity of abstract labor. (1988: 17; emphasis in original; see also 15 and 20).

Wood's punch line is that capitalism is "structurally indifferent" to social identities and therefore it can "discard" them (1988: 20). We might add that it hasn't discarded them, but it could and it might.

Wood's version of "transformative emancipatory politics" suggests that, because capitalism's structural indifference to, for example race and gender, the eradication of race and gender oppression are "not in themselves fatally dangerous to capitalism, they could succeed without dismantling the capitalist system" (1988: 8). And, she adds, "they are probably unlikely to succeed if they remain detached from the anti-capitalist struggle (1988: 8). The price of not privileging class, Wood insists, is to "accommodate ourselves to capitalism" (1990: 77). Because, she suggests, capitalism has and will accept, for example, gender and race equality without altering the structure of class.

Even as she recognizes the importance of other social struggles, Wood ultimately wants to make class primary to our understanding of capitalism. She writes, "We can acknowledge that while all oppressions have equal *moral* claims, class exploitation has a different *historical* status, a more strategic location at the heart of capitalism" (1990: 77, emphasis in original). Such an understanding highlights the constitutive role of class in capitalism, by emphasizing that "*other* inequalities and oppressions" have "*different* relations to capitalism, a *different* place in the systemic logic of capitalism, and therefore a different role in our struggle against it" (1990: 80, emphasis in original). Wood's mixture of theory, historical analysis, and thought experiment may not clinch the argument either, but it does call us to a fuller and deeper exploration than Anievas and Nişancıoğlu provide.⁵

Like Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, Wood combines differences (the many forms of oppression) with unity (the oneness or totality of capitalism). The task in front of us is to assess *how* they combine them. We have been more

generous to Wood's account so far. This circuitous route allows us now to compare their different renderings of what is "constitutive" of capitalism.

The permissive version of constitutive, the version we believe is predominantly (but not exclusively) employed by Anievas and Nişancioğlu, treats it empirically—as a synonym for "correlative," or "historically bound up with." Thus, gender and race oppressions constitute capitalism in the sense that they: (1) are somehow bundled and emerge together with the rise of capitalism; and (2) have intersected since. Wood's more exacting version of constitutive has less to do with history and more to do with logical necessity. In Chakrabarty's terms, as we shall see in the next section, this is a distinction between becoming and being. In Wood's terms, we can conceive of capitalism without racism or sexism but not without class. Wood's constitutive means "not conceivable without," or "logically and structurally necessary."

Perhaps an analogy can help us locate the difference between them. Flight always has drag – air currents – as its correlate. But flight is conceivable without drag, as for example, in a vacuum – whether the vacuum is conceived in a thought experiment or created by engineers. Flight, however, is not conceivable without escape from gravity. A counter-gravitational thrust is constitutive of flight. Using the terms of this example, Anievas and Nişancioğlu are using the historical co-presence of race and gender oppression as drag, as correlates of capitalism and therefore as constitutive of it. In contrast, Wood is using constitutive as logical or structural necessity, as thrust. For her, only class counts as constitutive -- the other oppressions are important but correlative.

Leaving our argument like this would be ungenerous and also imprecise. Anievas and Nişancioğlu actually employ both meanings of constitutive. Or, rather, they straddle an uneasy and implicit tension between the two. Since only class is constitutive (in the strong sense) of capitalism, they cannot claim that gender, race, etc. are logically or structurally necessary for capitalism. To their credit, they don't make that claim explicitly. But since their "transformative emancipatory" politics requires of them the non-privileging of class and the necessity of multiple though commonly anti-capitalist struggles, they are forced to think of "race, gender, and so on" as not just correlative but also as necessary. Their accounts span the two meanings and therefore their deployment of constitutive remains indefinite and imprecise – especially relative to Wood's analysis.

Our staged debate between Anievas and Nişancioğlu and Wood has repercussions, we believe, well beyond their particular encounter. This debate surfaces also in various understandings of Marx's method – a debate Anievas and Nişancioğlu also engage, drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's work.

The Tension in Marx's Method: Logic and History; Being and Becoming

Marx's account of method in the *Grundrisse* evades the individualistic standpoint of the bourgeois economist by appealing to what he imagines as a distinctly social conception: "individuals producing in society . . . is, of course, the point of departure" (Marx 1973: 83). What does it mean to begin with the society as a whole? If we consider the political economy of a country – what Anievas and Nişancioğlu might call an "internalist" account, though the method might be applied to more geographically encompassing totalities – we might begin by describing various features of the social whole, such as its population, the distribution of that population in town and country, the branches of production, exports and imports, and commodity prices that Marx calls the "real and the concrete." However obvious a place to begin, this method, he insists, "proves false." Such descriptions add up to no more than "a chaotic conception of the whole," even as this muddled set of descriptions presuppose a set of categories that shape those descriptions and which are the real object of analysis. They lead the theorist to a necessary process of conceptual abstraction that, Marx argues, allows identification of the "simplest determinations." With these simpler categories in hand, "the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of the whole, but as *a rich totality of many determinations and relations*" (1973: 100; emphasis added).

We take Marx to mean, and we believe Anievas and Nişancioğlu would agree, that, like historical events, detailed descriptions of social life (i.e. empirics) do not speak for themselves and must be integrated by a "speculative" method that binds the narrative with a purpose and gives social life its logic and laws of motion. That is, the presentation of a social form as a set of facts generates only superficial understanding unless there is an analytical support system (composed of categories arranged as a totality of determinations) that constitutes those facts as relevant for our apprehension. Understanding that system – its categories and their necessary interrelations – is a precondition for understanding a social whole since this system of thought gives shape to the

descriptions. Marx is aware that this, what he calls his “scientifically correct method” of political economy where the social whole is constructed as a unity of many opposed categories by complex processes of mediation, or, as Marx puts it, the “concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse” (1973: 101).

As Ollman (1971: 15) expresses it: “The relation is the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx’s conception of social reality.” This counters the standard view that “social factors” can be treated as “logically independent of other social factors,” their relations being “contingent, rather than necessary” (Ollman 1971: 15). For Marx, as Ollman (1971: 25-6) explains, the relation of value and labor is not one of causal relation—that labor produces value—but an expression of the social whole. The ties Marx expresses are “internal” to use Ollman’s formulation: being internal to the social factors they are “ontological relations,” conditions of existence of the social factors as part of a relational whole (Ollman 1971: 15, 28). To return to Anievas and Nişancioğlu, external to Europe cannot mean external to the structuring of capitalism as a totality. What is at issue is what constitutes capitalism as a relational totality.

Marx gives an answer that locates other sociohistorical forms external to capitalism and makes them understood only in terms set down by capitalism. For Marx, it is only with the complex unity of mediations and determinations – the relational whole – of the most *advanced* society that we can even begin to capture the logic of the present and, at the same time, the logic of *all* prior forms of society. Marx expresses this equation in a rather famous passage:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and relations of production of all the vanquished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it builds itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc. (1973: 105)

Through this passage, Marx locates the starting point of his analysis – not just with any social whole, but specifically modern capitalist society.

One does not begin with the past to understand the present. It is not just that the most advanced capitalist states reveal the future to the less advanced, but that all less advanced modes of society can be understood *only* in terms of their movement towards capitalism. The more developed form – capitalism – engulfs and assimilates the lesser developed within itself. Everything is understood from the perspective of capitalism – its reproduction, its historical role, and the analytical simplifications that make it possible as a form of social production. In this respect, Marx's work is "capitalocentric" in the sense suggested by Gibson-Graham (2006: 6-8). The non-capitalist is located at the periphery of our understanding; it lacks "the fullness and completeness of capitalist 'development.'" "Noncapitalism" cannot share the time of the capitalist: it "is the before or the after of capitalism." Other "forms of economy (not to mention noneconomic aspects of social life) are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism." They are either the same and therefore the moral and political equivalent of capitalism or different and, therefore, "deficient or substandard." The different is not allowed a space but within capitalism's "orbit." Capitalism is the "pinnacle of social evolution" up to this point. It is a "unified," if internally contradictory, "system or body," that "confers meaning upon subjects and other sites in relations to itself, as the contents of its container, laid out upon its grid, identified and valued with respect to its definitive being." And finally, it serves as the "'hero' of the industrial development narrative, the inaugural subject of 'history,' the bearer of the future, of modernity, of universality."

Though not put in quite these terms, it is precisely here that Anievas and Nişancioğlu depart from Marx, though, based on our earlier discussion, the departure is not complete. They also seek a "unified theory" of a social whole. They believe that uneven and combined development "allows for the organic – rather than contingent or external – integration of 'geopolitical' and 'sociological' dimensions into a single, unified theory of historical change subsuming 'internalist' and 'externalist' theories of modal transitions." But on its face, this is not a theory of capitalism, but of "human history" applicable "beyond the capitalist epoch" (44). This is the space of their explanatory middle path between geopolitics and sociology, "internalist" and "externalist" moments, and class and other forms of exploitation/oppression. However, and unlike Marx, the concepts of "bourgeois society" do not govern their analysis of the social whole. The concepts appropriate to this space are the "component mechanisms," such as the "'whip of external necessity,' 'privilege of historical backwardness,' 'advantages' and 'penalties of priority,' 'contradictions of sociological

amalgamation," that give "human development as a whole" its specific dynamics" or "laws of motion" (44, 62, 83). The concepts of bourgeois society in Marx's sense are apparently not adequate to understanding its own "structure." But these concepts are insufficient only if we adapt the broader notion of constitution encompassing the "correlative" so that the past and non-capitalist social forms become the key to understanding the present and the future. In this way, Anievas and Nişancioğlu hope to redeem the Marxist tradition from Eurocentrism.

For Anievas and Nişancioğlu this challenge to Eurocentrism enabled by postcolonial thinkers like Chakrabarty opens us to "the broad range of sociohistorical processes operating in the 'extra-European' world (difference) without abandoning a focus on the "universal reach" of capitalism (unity), here conceived as "colonialism and imperialism" (36). Returning to Chakrabarty's work allows us to see more clearly the challenges Anievas and Nişancioğlu's face in establishing the basis for their "transformative emancipatory" politics.

Dipesh Chakrabarty too worries that Marx leaves little space for difference. He writes that "Marx's use of categories such as 'bourgeois' and 'prebourgeois' or 'capital' and 'precapital'" places him as among the philosophers that "read into European history an entelechy of universal reason" (2000: 29). For Marx, Chakrabarty explains,

[t]he prefix *pre* here signifies a relationship that is both chronological and theoretical. The coming of the bourgeois or capitalist society, Marx argues in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere, gives rise for the first time to a history that can be apprehended through a philosophical and universal category, "capital." History becomes, for the first time, *theoretically* knowable. (2000: 29-30)

As we have seen, Marx believes history can be known because "differences among histories" are "invariably overcome by capital in the long run" (2000: 47).

And, yet, Chakrabarty, like Anievas and Nişancioğlu, wants to hold onto Marx. He reminds us that Marx's writings were crucial to *Subaltern Studies*, helping to constitute a key moment in "anti-imperial thought" (2000: 47). He wagers that there is enough ambiguity in Marx's work that a world understood in Marxist terms "may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous" (2000: 46).

Chakrabarty offers an alternative reading, one that resists this sublation, engulfing, and assimilation – this erasure of difference (2000: 50). He notes

that, in both *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that there is a connection between how logical and historical processes unfold. The “real and concrete” events of history unfold according to or sublated to a logic that can be captured in the unfolding of the thought process of abstraction: the “the path of abstract thought” corresponds “to the real historical process” (Marx 1973: 102). Against that, Marx posits a relative autonomy for the historical process. But just barely. Marx still appears to argue that the logically and historically most advanced society contains and supersedes the social forms of all previous societies. The implication of this move – the displacement of the other into the precapitalist; into the realm of the backward – is precisely the kind of Eurocentrism that Chakrabarty wishes to avoid. To do so, he must open a space within Marx’s tight binding of historical development with the unfolding of logical abstractions associated with the most advanced form of society.

He opens this space by noting that Marx’s method also allows for the material unfolding of history. In *Grundrisse*, as Charkrabarty notes, Marx suggests that the logic of capital discerned in the present, directs us “to the real history of the relations of production” – to “empirical” realities “which point towards a past lying behind this system” (Marx 1973: 460-1). These remarks give a greater role to difference in our reading of the relations between “being” and “becoming.” In the first account, the “being” of capital is what capital is in its full development, whereas “becoming” is the historical process by which it comes to this fullness of “being.” Chakrabarty (2000: 62) points out that “[b]ecoming is not simply the calendrical or chronological past that precedes capital but the past that the category retrospectively posits.” Marx (1973: 459) noted that capital “posits the conditions for its realization” and Chakrabarty takes this to mean that “becoming” includes those events that are the necessary prerequisites to capital’s own “being” – a kind of time retrospectively posited by capital. For example, there would be no workers available to capital if labor still had living connections with either land or tools. Capital posits a pool of workers “freed” from the means of production as a prerequisite of capitalist production and thus enclosures and proletarianization are necessary features of capitalism’s “becoming.” Those historical elements that are the necessary pre-conditions of capital’s “being” form the structure of *the* story of capital’s “becoming” in what Chakrabarty calls “History 1.” As he puts it: “this is the universal and necessary history we associate with capital. It forms the backbone of the usual narrative of transition to the capitalist mode of production” (2000: 63).

Chakrabarty (2000: 58) cannot afford to make too much of this opening. He recognizes that Marx's equivocations create ambiguity. "Marx himself," he says, "warns us against understandings of capital that emphasize the historical at the expense of the structural or the philosophical." This warning strongly coincides with Marx's discussion of the method of political economy that we examined above. Chakrabarty's most compelling suggestion comes, however, when he (but not Marx) treats the being and becoming of capital not as mutually exclusive, but as overlapping:

"Becoming," the question of the past of capital, does not have to be thought of as a process outside of and prior to its "being." If we describe "becoming" as the past posited by the category "capital" itself, then we make "being" logically prior to "becoming." In other words, History 1 and History 2, *considered together*, destroy the usual topological distinction of the outside and the inside that marks debates about whether or not the whole world can be properly said to have fallen under the sway of capital. Difference, in this account, is not something external to capital. Nor is it something subsumed into capital. It lives in intimate and plural relation to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality. (2000: 65-6; emphasis added)

Here, Chakrabarty comes close to Anievas and Nişancioğlu's effort to chart a middle pathway between the internal of capitalist relations and the external that is beyond.

For Chakrabarty, History 2 is inside, if not quite fully of, capital. Since it is unconquered and may be unconquerable, it resists capital. The non- or pre- or *a*-capitalist elements of History 2 are a "category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1" (2000: 66). Thus, Chakrabarty's reading seems to resist the "capitalocentrism" that seems central to Marx's dominant historical account and methodological self-understanding. Chakrabarty (2000: 67) himself points at something like this conclusion:

The idea of History 2 allows us to make room, in Marx's own analytic of capital, for the politics of human belonging and diversity. It gives us a ground on which to situate our thoughts about multiple ways of being human and their relationship to the global logic of capital.

In this way, Chakrabarty (2000: 70-1) has staged an encounter where "the universal history of capital and the politics of human belonging are allowed to interrupt each other's narrative." This means that "[c]apital brings into every history some of the universal themes of the European Enlightenment." Reciprocally, "[w]hat interrupts and defers capital's self-realization are the

various History 2s that always modify History 1 and thus act as our grounds for claiming historical difference." Perhaps so. But what kind of space is there for difference if History 2 only *modifies* History 1? It seems as if the logic of dialectical unfolding can be interrupted but not refused. This strikes us as a rather one-sided encounter.

We applaud Anievas and Nişancioğlu's desire for the encounter to be less one-sided. Difference external to capitalism and Europe is to be given a greater role. For example, their account of the "classical" bourgeois revolutions (in chapter 6) press against the dominant story that treats the impetus to social and political transformation as principally the internal energies of an unfolding and spatially delimited social formation: a crisis of feudalism in Europe that is explained by the progressive logic of the stage that will succeed it. To take one snapshot, geopolitical struggles within Europe and beyond (incorporating the Ottomans) had economic reverberations that strengthened the Dutch merchant and banking economy, weakening the Habsburg's hold on rule and emboldening the Dutch revolt against a predominantly feudal ruler. And this gradual rise of the Dutch was prepared by growing urbanization and shifting patterns of trade away from the Mediterranean that lead to increasing proletarianization. But by emphasizing proletarianization this story does not displace the controlling role of Marx's History 1. Spatial themes dominate this narrative and the categorical or ontological claims recede into the background.

Chapter 5 on the Atlantic brings a different emphasis. Anievas and Nişancioğlu establish the intersocietal connections of the Atlantic system. Different societies without (much) prior contact are brought into intersocietal interactions that take the primary form of conquest, settler colonization, plantation slavery, and merchant capital. The authors go beyond recovering different social forms that a European imagination erases by treating the Amerindian societies as a warp on time, where difference is translated into absences that justify genocide and enslavement. Anievas and Nişancioğlu mean to stress "the way in which the different means of production are combined in the act of production itself," and "how the expanded reproduction of capitalism was only made possible" through this system that included "unfree labour" (169). These "combined" forms of production are directly "*generative* of precisely those social forces in the 'core' that would end up making a decisive contribution to consolidating Europe's capitalist transition" (172). Here, History 2 plays a central role, but that role goes beyond interrupting History 1. Rather it is central to it. Conditions thought prior to capitalism are not simply resistant to

the unfolding of History 1, but contribute to that unfolding in important ways. The punch-lines Anievas and Nişancioğlu's deliver in this chapter nevertheless still mostly accept the controlling logic of History 1. The constitutive role of the non-capitalist elements of the Atlantic system appear "correlative,"—a description of "interacting 'causal chains'"-- but not logically necessary. The narrative remains lodged in the tension between notions of constitution, but steers a path short of any ontological flattening between social formations.

Yet in the conclusion to *How the West Came to Rule*, Anievas and Nişancioğlu see their contribution as "a rethinking of what historically and theoretically constitutes capitalism" (278). Here, History 1 and 2 appear to be collapsed and the categorical distinction between capitalism and other social formations seems effaced. This move brings us back to our assertion at the outset that this swing to an expanded notion of capitalism is required not simply by the historical facts, a positivism they cannot easily defend, nor by their charting of a middle path that avoids a flattening of ontologies of social forms. Rather, Anievas and Nişancioğlu require this collapsing of History 1 and 2 to support their political commitments.

Final Thoughts: The Real and the Revolutionary Agent

Anievas and Nişancioğlu bring *How the West Came to Rule* to an end with two paragraphs that occupy the ambiguous space marked out by competing understandings of constitutive relations and the ontology of capitalism. They see the strength of their work as "uncovering the ways in which the multiple social relations of oppression and exploitation, each originating from a variety of different vectors of social historical development, combine and intersect with each other." Though not reducible to capitalism, since the constitution of patriarchy and racism are historically separable and constitutively distinct from capitalism, nevertheless "the [contemporary] struggles to destroy patriarchy and racism" are neither "somehow external from" or "mere supplements to . . . the cardinal aim of destroying capitalism." If so, "the privileged revolutionary subject" appears to lose "its singular association with waged labor," or put differently and rather ambiguously, "the very abolition of wage-labour as a category would require that we take the plurality of political experiences seriously" and consider how these experiences might together "be effectively weaponised against capitalism." Anievas and Nişancioğlu close with a series of admonitions: "the politics of revolution must be understood not in terms of a

singular strategy” and the “multiple strategies” pursued by “different social movements” are available as sources of learning that might be “repurposed, reconfigured, reassembled and ultimately weaponized” as part of expanding “communist horizons” and “revolutionary potentialities” (282).

Despite the skill and insight with which they map the intersocietal connections at work in the history of capitalism, we remain skeptical of this final move. Anievas and Nişancioğlu generally chart a middle way that eschews the kinds of determinant claims now out of Marxist fashion. The differences embraced by the text cut against any sociological claim of a unified condition that serves as the substrate for a united purpose underlying the myriad oppressions and movements. The middle way that renders contingencies central to the historical narrative of the rise of capitalism cannot but leave Anievas and Nişancioğlu unable to hail into being a movement of movements that is *necessarily* constituted as an agent with the historical role of destroying capitalism. Instead, they navigate back to the structural pole, collapsing being and becoming in order in to translate the historical contingencies that make multiple and correlative oppressions into a determinant structure that joins the differences of oppressions and movements into an underlying unity.

We now can return to our initial intuition about *How the West Came to Rule*. We see why Anievas and Nişancioğlu need capitalism as devoid of redeeming characteristics. Contemporary conditions tightly link (ontologically) the various maladies we face so that there is no alternative to a revolutionary movement. How else can we claim that the struggles are really one despite their differences? If bourgeois society offers real advances such that freedom and equality are not completely illusory, then contemporary movements organized around the various intersections of race, class, and gender may articulate their grievances consistent with liberal capitalist values and their projects can revolve around reform. Further, we might add, movements might be anti-capitalist in ways that Anievas and Nişancioğlu would find difficult to align with a transformative project. Tarak Barkawi has been heard to comment, “we don’t always get the resistance we want” in reflections on al Qaeda and Daesh. Movements then offer not only different strategies from which we might learn, but also different diagnoses of maladies, different mixtures of values, and different demands. Movements of the world may not necessarily unite.

Yet we sense in Anievas and Nişancioğlu a wish for greater certainty and an actor, however multi-varied and loosely linked, that can play the historical role

Marx previously reserved for the proletariat. We recognize that such a longing for an anti-capitalist struggle is almost unavoidable. Hailing a movement of movements to transformative action in the face of oppression and injustice is *de rigueur* for today's critical scholars, not least because nothing less will do given the felt urgency of contemporary conditions. But the need (and our desire) for transformative change do not an anti-capitalist movement make. Though we might accept that Anievas and Nişancioğlu's work reveals the possible conjoining of various movements and struggles in anti-capitalist directions, we fathom no necessity attached to that conclusion. Nor, on our reading, do Anievas and Nişancioğlu. Decentering the narrow logic of capitalism also decenters claims about a unified historical agent. Put differently, we see Anievas and Nişancioğlu's craving for a certainty already laden with the impossibility of such certainty. The real unity of the text is achieved by their politics not their historical account nor their theoretical framework. The revolutionary agent is the Real of the text: that which is both impossible and necessary, securing closure to the work by covering that which challenges its unity and, and in this case, its desired political meaning.

Notes

¹ See Inayatullah and Blaney (1995: 5-8) and Blaney and Inayatullah (2010b: 41-4).

² We share Anievas and Nişancioğlu's concern. See Blaney and Inayatullah (2010a, chapter 6).

³This impression supports our general feeling that the book would suffer little if the whole apparatus of uneven and combined development were simply dropped for a more general relational understanding of histories as connected (see Barkawi and Laffey 2006 and Bhambra 2010). Each of the historical chapters evokes the language of uneven and combined development at the beginning and the end, with a few glancing references to advantages of backwardness or geopolitical whipsawing in between. The detailed narrative is most effective when it refrains from trying to fit the story into its framework. For an example of a more effective strategy, see Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Lowe 2015) where narratives are mostly unencumbered by such a mechanical scheme, though still gently inflected with theoretical insight.

⁴Of course there is a problem here, one that Anievas and Nişancioğlu anticipate in this quotation from Marx: "Once interconnection has been revealed, all theoretical belief in the perpetual necessity of the existing conditions collapses, even before the collapse takes place in practice" (Marx 1868: 67; quoted on 274). The problem is that, once a proper and thorough "intersocietal" analysis, what Marx calls "interconnection," has

been revealed, then “West” and “non-West” themselves collapse as categories. See Inayatullah and Blaney (2015).

⁵Nor it is clear that Anievas and Nişancioğlu’s Marxian historical sociology should be privileged in that exploration. We might turn to feminist work on social reproduction; detailed studies of the labor process; new materialisms; or a move to cultural political economy more generally. Wood’s account gains some support from efforts by feminist scholars Nancy Fraser (1997) and Iris Marion Young (1991) to draw categorical distinctions between various forms of oppression, however much they might be connected in specific social practices and however much particular social movements might aim to redress multiple and connected oppressions. But movements’ aims also may be cross-cutting; thus, there is no necessity that these movements converge on a common anti-capitalist mission. Perhaps reflecting the times, later work by Fraser (2014a and b) seems to move in the opposite direction towards an “expanded” understanding of capitalism and a unified struggle underlying the many.

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