

S&S Quarterly, Inc.
Guilford Press

Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism: A Comment

Author(s): Samir Amin

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Science & Society*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 67-72

Published by: [Guilford Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403048>

Accessed: 23/06/2012 18:52

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



S&S Quarterly, Inc. and *Guilford Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science & Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



COMMUNICATIONS

Science & Society, Vol. 54, No. 1, Spring 1990, 67–72

COLONIALISM AND THE RISE OF CAPITALISM: A COMMENT

1. With regard to the so-called Chinese formula I would say that the points of view expressed by J. M. Blaut (1989) seem to me 70% correct. By that I mean that I share the essential points of these theses but with important nuances and reservations.

Blaut's two central theses converge perfectly with those which I have myself developed. These are:

(i) that capitalism is not the product of an exclusive, specific conjuncture proper to the history of Europe, but is the necessary outcome of contradictions operating in an analogous manner in all advanced pre-capitalist societies;

(ii) that colonization has played from its origin (that is to say from the conquest of America) a decisive double role, on the one hand triggering the rapid passage to capitalism in Europe and from that fact brutally halting elsewhere advances that were moving in the same direction.

That having been said, the nuances and reservations which I shall express bear on these two points. They are:

(i) the manner in which one ought to deal with "specificity" (European and other) in advanced pre-capitalist societies;

(ii) the mechanism and the place of polarization within the world capitalist system (the centers-peripheries contrast, which is a broader concept than that of colonization).

2. J. M. Blaut defends the thesis according to which all or almost all of the societies of the period immediately preceding the conquest of

America in the 16th century were at an analogous stage of development which he calls feudal, and that all (or at the very least a great number) of these societies were engaged in a transition toward capitalism, marked by the visible importance of those segments of society managed by "proto-capitalist" forms (private property, wage labor, production for the market).

On these two fundamental points Blaut's views are closely akin to my own (cf. *Class and Nation*, Monthly Review, 1980; *Delinking*, Zed Press, 1989). Doubtless it is a mere quibble to note that I believe that a certain number of societies (notably in Sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps in Indian America) had not yet really surpassed the earlier stage which I have called the communal (cf. *Class and Nation*, Chap. 2). Nevertheless, we are in agreement, Blaut and I, in maintaining that China, India, the Islamic East and Mediterranean were in no sense "behind" Medieval Europe, neither in their level of development of productive forces (in agriculture and in the work of artisans), nor in their forms of social and political organization (state, urbanization, etc.), nor in the importance of their proto-capitalist forms as evidence of an ongoing transition toward capitalism. For me as for Blaut, capitalism was gestating in all these societies characterized by the same fundamental contradictions which would engender the same forms (proto-capitalist) in the process of their development. The Eurocentric thesis which we both contest opposes on the one hand a Europe capable of further progress (already characterized, according to this myth, by an exceptional dynamism, the embryo of freedom etc.) and on the other hand a not less mythical Orient defined as "stagnant" and characterized by "oriental despotism," etc. According to this view, these oriental lands were historically not the potential bearers of progress, but rather were securely boxed into an historical impasse from which only colonization would be capable of liberating them. In *Eurocentrism* (Monthly Review Press, 1989) I qualified the Eurocentric thesis as "culturalism," meaning that it is based on the hypothesis that the different "cultures" (European, "Oriental") are characterized by transhistorical invariants which determine developments which are not subject to the laws of general evolution. There I tried to show the mythological character of these invariants, artificially constructed both to legitimize the specific dynamic opened by European history (by the myths of Greek ancestry, by "Christianophilia," by racism) and to legitimize by contrast the supposed impasse of other societies.

What remains is that Blaut characterizes the pre-capitalist societies in question as feudal and I as tributary. Is this only a question of semantics? I think not because behind the choice of these terms lies the

whole question of the “specificities” proper to the different societies of the pre-capitalist world.

3. The difference which separates capitalism from all the advanced societies which precede it is not only a quantitative difference in the degree of development of the productive forces. The difference is qualitative. In capitalism, surplus value (the profit of capital) is obtained through the economic mechanism of the law of value whereas in all earlier societies the extraction of the surplus takes the form of a tribute imposed by non-economic means. The contrast between on the one hand the transparency of economic phenomena in pre-capitalist societies and on the other hand its opaqueness through the law of value in capitalism leads to a reversal of the hierarchy of authority; whereas the economy directly commands the capitalist dynamic (which is then expressed through the play of economic laws which seem to impose themselves on society as laws of nature), the politico-ideological authority is dominant in earlier societies. I believe that Marx precisely emphasized this reversal of relations between structure and superstructure and therefore by contrast with capitalism, the essential character common to all advanced pre-capitalist (that is to say, non-communal) forms.

Unfortunately, the dominant currents of Marxism later relegated to the wings this noted qualitative contrast and, on the other hand, developed beyond measure — in my opinion — the concept of “modes of production.” In this way, they emphasized the specificities proper to each of the societies which I call tributary to the point of ignoring the essential common characteristics which they shared.

The “theory” of modes of production emphasizes the status of labor (slavery, serfdom, free communities subjected to tribute etc.). In so doing, it certainly contributed to a better understanding of the function of different forms of pre-capitalist exploitation. But it was a misapplication, in my view, because this “theory” of the modes of production (in the plural) replaced a broader and necessary theory of pre-capitalist society (in the singular) and of the dynamic of its contradictions. In its exclusive emphasis on the status of labor, dogmatic Marxism refused to consider the superstructural dynamic (instead resting content with a vague theory of the superstructure as a “reflection” of the exigencies of the economic base), just as it refused to analyze the potential forms of pre-capitalist societies closely bound by multiple relations — political, cultural (religious among others), and also economic. “Trade” — long-distant commerce — was regarded as of “no importance,” and the anathema of “circulationist” deviation” was thrown in the face of everyone who was interested in it!

Clearly this reduction of Marxism was not predisposed to understand the nature of the appropriate proto-capitalist forms for the transition to capitalism, nor to understand the nature of the "world system" proper to this transition. As Blaut has noted, this reduction is the source of the refusal to give a proper place to the conquest of America in the birth of capitalism. At the same time, this reduction inspired research in a false direction, namely that of the possible "succession" of modes of production such as that of slavery-feudalism. Or by default, Marxism became trapped in the mythological contrast of the "two roads": the open Occidental way (slavery-feudalism-capitalism) and the cul-de-sac of the "Asiatic mode of production." I have criticized and rejected these theses and have tried to demonstrate their Eurocentric character. Here perhaps I should only add that the term "tributary mode of production" which I proposed was of no help in avoiding the abuses of the theory of the modes of production; the choice of "tributary social forms" would have been more effective.

In fact, pre-capitalist societies are evidently also characterized by numerous specificities of diverse nature, status, and importance. It appears to me that the principal source of differentiation, of particular importance, is a result of what I have called the "central" or "peripheral" character of the tributary society under consideration. Now on this level the "central" or "peripheral" character in question should be found in the area of the dominant authority, that is to say in that of the state (power) and of ideology (cultures, religions), whereas the "central" or "peripheral" character of a capitalist formation is located in the area of the economy. In this sense, I have defined feudalism not as a specific mode of production but as a specific — peripheral — form of tributary society. A peripheral form precisely because the centralization of state power which defines central tributary society is here embryonic: the absolute monarchies (close to the advanced tributary model) appeared relatively late in Europe, precisely in the proto-capitalist phase of the mercantilist transition. I have explained this peripheral character of feudalism by the proximity of the communal phase among the barbarians from which developed Medieval Europe. But this lag in Europe — less advanced than the Oriental tributaries — does not seem to have been a handicap in the acceleration of later developments, but on the contrary an advantage because of the greater flexibility of the society which it encompassed. Blaut rejects this thesis, too quickly in my view, because my thesis is in no way contradictory to his; it is indeed complementary to his view, and reinforces it.

4. I therefore believe, with Blaut, that the acceleration of the proto-capitalist evolution of mercantile Europe is inseparable from the conquest of the Americas. The quantitative calculation which he has proposed

concerning exploited labor in the peripheries of this new world system (independently of the variety of statuses of the worker which he correctly rejects as a pertinent argument regarding the measure of participation of colonial exploitation in the capitalist development of Europe), as well as his denial of the well-known accusation of "circulationism" are for me important contributions.

This analysis may be continued, even beyond the subject taken up by Blaut in his short paper. Beyond the colonization of the Americas, the rapid emergence of capitalism as a world system perpetuated the mechanisms of centralization of the surplus to the benefit of the centers. These mechanisms should be analyzed principally in terms of what I have called "the law of world value." In a general way the law of value assumes an integral market in the products of social labor (which then become commodities), of capital and of labor. It then brings about a tendency toward standardization, in the space where it operates, of the prices of identical commodities and of the remunerations of capital and labor (under the wage form or under that of the remuneration of the simple commodity producer).

This approximation corresponds well to empirical reality in the central capitalist formations. But on the scale of the world capitalist system the law of value operates on the basis of a truncated market which integrates well the trade in commodities and the movements of capital, but excludes labor power from it. The law of world value then tends to standardize the prices of commodities but not the remuneration of labor, since the range of its world distribution is infinitely greater than that of the distribution of productivity. Thus the ratio of the mean productivities of labor at the center and at the periphery is 3 to 1, whereas the ratio of the mean remunerations of labor is 10 to 1. The law of world value operates in the direction of a polarization without precedence in history. An approximate calculation which I have developed, based on the present world distribution of labor power integrated into the system, the comparative productivities of labor and their remunerations in the center and in the periphery — thoroughly analogous with Blaut's thought on the extent of the role of colonial America — shows the decisive importance of this transfer of value (built into the structure of prices and revenues and therefore hidden) in the reproduction of capitalist polarization (cf. *Class and Nation*, Ch. 6).

Even beyond the law of world value, unequal access to natural resources, technological monopolies, extra-economic mechanisms of political and military domination, and the effects of the domination of life-styles, organization and consumption have vastly increased this polarization in every dimension. In fact, I believe that the polarization of wealth and power within the world capitalist system has passed through

three stages: In the 17th and 18th centuries, thanks to the colonization of America and its effects on the acceleration of the mercantilist proto-capitalism of Atlantic Europe, that part of the world acquired for the first time a decisive superiority over the old civilizations of the Orient which it prepared to attack, thus provoking a halt in their own proto-capitalist evolution (and even sometimes bringing about regressive involutions). In the 19th century the industrial revolution and then imperialism (in the classical Leninist sense of the term) accentuated this polarization of wealth and power, which became expressed in the contrast between industrialized and non-industrialized countries. I propose the thesis that the structural crisis of our epoch (starting with 1970) inaugurates a new stage in world domination (marked by new technologies, new forms of world-wide finance capital, etc.) which results not in a reduction but an aggravation of polarization. The peripheral industrialization of one part and the "Fourth-Worldization" of another part constitute the new forms corresponding to this last stage of polarization.

Does Blaut's reasoning imply that the transfer of value from the peripheries toward the centers constitutes the essential reason for the differential in remuneration of labor? It may, but only implicitly. If this is so then I cannot share this simplistic point of view. This is because the calculations which I have proposed show that the (high) level of wages in the center are principally explained by the (high) productivity of labor. However, the transfer of value from the peripheries toward the centers comprises a major obstacle to the acceleration of accumulation in the periphery, and particularly subordinates the latter to the requirements of its deployment in the center. Moreover, these transfers, like the other dimensions of polarization (above all, access to the natural resources of the whole globe to the exclusive profit of the centers), have largely contributed to making possible a continuous and ultimately prodigious amelioration of labor productivity in the center. I have expressed these conclusions in the following phrase: the development of the center explains the underdevelopment of the periphery, but the reverse is not true.

SAMIR AMIN

Dakar, Senegal

Translated from the French by J. M. Cammett

REFERENCE

- Blaut, J. M. 1989. "Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism." *Science & Society*, 53:3 (Fall), 260-296.