

### III. On Jim Blaut's 'Fourteen ninety-two'

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Blaut's 'Fourteen ninety-two' is an important contribution to the debate on the rise of capitalism. The paper follows a previous one by the same author, entitled 'Colonialism and the rise of capitalism' which I reviewed for *Science and Society* (vol. 54, no. 1, 1990). As I noted previously, Blaut's two central theses converge perfectly with those which I have myself developed. These are:

1. that capitalism is not the product of an exclusive, specific conjuncture proper to the history of Europe, but it is the necessary outcome of contradictions operating in an analogous manner in all advanced pre-capitalist societies; and
2. 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 in consequence, on the other hand, brutally halting elsewhere advancements which had been going in the same direction.

In this new paper J. M. Blaut provides some additional strong arguments in favour of his theses. First, he rejects some of the main Eurocentric arguments aimed at proving the so-called exceptionality of the European line of development, which are bound to overestimate the internal class struggle between serfs and lords as well as some so-called specific 'cultural' features (Weber, Perry Anderson, Robert Brunner, etc. . . .). I shall not come back on this critique which I wholly share, having myself developed a similar line of argument in my book, *Eurocentrism* (Amin, 1988). Secondly, he adds to his previous arguments in favour of the decisive role played by the colonization of America in the rise of capitalism. Indeed, Eurocentric history often plays down—and even forgets—the quantitative as well as qualitative role played by the American periphery in the mercantilist transition to industrial capitalism (the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries), such as:

1. The constant and massive flows of gold and silver from America which reinforced considerably the social position of merchants within European society and gave them an absolute advantage in their competition with the oriental traders who previously had dominated large networks of long-distance trade—the Europeans could offer better prices for all goods in all markets.
2. The importance of the plantations' profits, also often routinely underestimated. Blaut reminds us that in 1600 Brazil exported sugar with a gross value of £2 000 000, i.e. double the total value of all exports from England to all the world in that year. He indicates that the rates of profit in the plantation system were so high that production capacities could be doubled every two years.

3. The importance of American peripheral capitalism in the world system of these times. Blaut reminds us here, for instance, that Potosi had a population of 120 000 in the 1570s (larger than Paris).
4. Blaut comes back in this paper on another of his quantitative decisive calculations, that of the population directly exploited—and over-exploited—in the Americas, to the benefit of European mercantile capitalism.

In a word, Blaut shows clearly that America was not a new and additional 'trading partner' of Europe (as Oriental societies were and continued to be for some time), but was fabricated as a peripheral subaltern society playing a crucial role for capital accumulation. Enterprises in the Americas were established from the very start as a matter of profit and capital accumulation.

Finally Blaut addresses in this paper three new sets of questions:

1. The question of the 'crisis' of the mercantilist system in the 17th century. Blaut argues, convincingly, that this crisis was the result of a shift in the use of the profits extracted from the exploitation of the Americas: instead of being reinvested in western Europe itself, this surplus was channelled towards a new expansion overseas (India) and in eastern Europe.
2. To the question 'Why was America conquered by Europeans and not Africans or Asians?', Blaut argues that the answer should be sought in geography: it was easier—even by chance—to reach the Atlantic coast of America starting from the Iberian peninsula than from further south; it was much more difficult for Asians to reach America through the Pacific.
3. To the question 'Why was the conquest successful?' Blaut stresses—rightly—the fact that American native agriculture was lagging 4000 years behind that of the Old World, due to the relative isolation of the continent.

As I have said already in my previous comments on Blaut's theses, I see a parallel development of my argument with respect to the mechanisms of the law of value operating in a global context. I also repeat here that in my understanding there is no contradiction, but rather a complementarity, between the argument based on the crucial importance of colonialism in the rise of capitalism and the argument that Europe—being peripheral in the previous stage of mankind's development (that stage which I call 'tributary')—enjoyed a degree of flexibility much higher than the more advanced regions of the East, and therefore could move faster in the new directions opened by the colonization of the Americas.

## Reference

AMIN, S. (1988). *Eurocentrism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.