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Why has modernization
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The ontology of capital in
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modernization theory

by:

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In a recent article for *History and Theory*, Barış Mücün has argued that efforts to overcome modernization theory in critical historical scholarship have not been successful because they have failed to question the ontological principles underlying it. Modernization theory is a model of social progress, which is based on the assumption that all societies evolve from a stage of “pre-modernism” or “tradition” to a stage of “modernity.” In this model, non-Western societies are seen to be in a process of catching up with the West. After the height of its popularity in the 1950s and 1960s and numerous critiques in the 1970s and 1980s, this model was thought to be overcome, until its comeback in the early 1990s proved otherwise. Mücün argues that even though critics of modernization theory have rightly outlined its Eurocentric, elitist bias and the teleological and essentialist thrust of its argument, they have not challenged the core principle of modernization theory: the “ontology of capital,” in which “being” is characterized with a form of capital and the particularity of a social entity is visible only by showing the degree of the effectivity of the capital it holds. Mücün draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital to describe how an object of analysis is constructed through this ontology. Simply put, the ontology of capital defines social entities “by measuring their distance and difference from one another based on their respective possession of particular properties,” or capital¹, and then objectifies these relations as hierarchies (f. e. of race, class and gender). These “objectified forms of hierarchies, reflected in the unequal distribution of capital turn into the given facts that determine the way the categories, such as class, gender, race, and nations, are used in research.”² This ontology, then, “does not necessarily require essentialism”³ as categories such as “West/non-West” or “modern/traditional” are “empirically constructed as a specific composition of capital that is constituted through the relations (of struggle over capital) that are conditioned by such distributions of capital.”⁴ Hence, Mücün argues that critical historical scholarship cannot overcome modernization theory simply by avoiding essentialism; it also has to challenge the ontology establishing its analytical categories.

Mücün’s criticism is directed at historian of Ottoman history Bernard Lewis, but he also criticizes traditional Marxists for their failure to recognize this capitalist ontology. Following Moishe Postone’s reading of Marx⁵ he tries to show that this ontology relies on the traditional “distribution model” of capital in Marxist scholarship. According to Postone, traditional Marxism locates the central contradiction of capitalism between the *mode of production* and the *mode of*

1 Barış Mücün, “The Ontology of Capital: On the Shared Methodological Limits of Modernization Theory and Its Critics,” *History and Theory* 57 (2018): 175.

2 Mücün, “The Ontology of Capital,” 180.

3 Mücün, 181.

4 Mücün, 186.

5 Moishe Postone, *Zeit, Arbeit und gesellschaftliche Herrschaft. Eine neue Interpretation der kritischen Theorie von Marx*, (Freiburg: ça ira-Verlag, 2003).

distribution and only the mode of distribution is seen as historically variable.⁶ Traditional Marxists therefore understand class struggle as a struggle over the mode of distribution and as the main agent of social change. Alternatives to capitalism derived from this understanding of capitalism focus on the abolition of the mode of distribution in which surplus is generated for the private use of capitalists, leaving the capitalist mode of production, productive proletarian labour, intact. By “traditional Marxism,” then, Postone does not mean a specific historical school of Marxism, but rather all Marxists who share this ontology. Mücen follows Postone in this understanding of traditional Marxism.

In this essay I will employ Mücen’s analysis of the “ontology of capital” to show why Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu’s⁷ model of “Uneven and Combined Development” (UCD) can neither sufficiently criticize modernization theory nor its revisionist variant by Kenneth Pomeranz⁸. While Mücen has focused on a work supportive of modernization theory to outline the basic premises of its ontology, I will treat two works critical of modernization theory: a revisionist variant by Pomeranz and a traditional Marxist critique by Anievas and Nisancioglu. I will show that both works construct difference, the hierarchy between the “West” and the “Rest,” as their object of analysis based on their shared ontology of capital.

Pomeranz claims that up until about 1750 “Europe could have been China” because its industrial output, consumption levels and demographic did not greatly differ in comparison to parts of China. According to Pomeranz, Europe rose above Asia in terms of economic output because of the fortunate location of coal on its mainland, and because it could exploit its overseas colonies to relieve pressure on the colonial centre by producing timber, cotton and foodstuffs in a much less “labour-“ and “land-intensive” way. Anievas and Nisancioglu object that this claim is impossible to sustain empirically, and that Europe did differ from other parts of the world before 1750—however, not because it was *more* developed but because it was *less* developed than many other parts of the world. They claim that European “backwardness” was a privilege: because European feudal lords were so backward when the Roman Empire collapsed, they could import the technological, military and ideological components of their “apparatus of feudal domination” from abroad. In the feudal mode of production aristocrats relied on the extraction of surpluses from the enserfed peasantry. New technology enabled them to successfully wage war and expand their land and thereby the amount of peasants available for surplus extraction. This process of

6 Moishe Postone, “Rethinking *Capital* in Light of the *Grundrisse*,” in *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, ed. Marcello Musto (London: Routledge, 2008), 120-145.

7 Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancioglu, “How Did the West Usurp the Rest? Origins of the Great Divergence over the *Longue Durée*,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59 (2017): 34–67.

8 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Kennet Pomeranz, “Political Economy and Ecology on the Eve of Industrialization: Europe, China and the Global Conjunction,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (April 2002): 425–446.

“geopolitical accumulation” led to the formation of centralised states and their violent overseas expansion.

On the first glance Pomeranz’ and Anievas/Nisancioglu’s arguments seem to oppose each other. The former sees the acquisition of colonies as a “lucky discovery” and only their exploitation appears as a direct consequence of capitalism. The latter interprets the forceful colonial expansion of Europe as a logical consequence of a uniquely European feudal tradition of “geopolitical accumulation.”

However, neither Pomeranz nor Anievas and Nisancioglu challenge the basic “ontology of capital” of modernization theory. They share two central premises. First, both analyses include only those actors who are differentiated on the basis of the distribution of capital between them. In Anievas and Nisancioglu’s case central actors are f.e. feudal aristocrats and revolting peasants or colonial empires and impoverished colonized states, who are in direct competition over resources and capital. Pomeranz places actors who can be statistically defined by their capital in the centre of analysis, f.e. citizens as consumers or Chinese women as workers. There is no direct argument of (class) struggle in Pomeranz’ account, but the level of consumption of Chinese workers is only relevant for Pomeranz in relation/comparison to European levels of consumption: their relationship is defined by the difference in capital distribution. Second, in both accounts, capitalism appears as an inevitable and coherent development from different points in time onwards: in Pomeranz’ account the ascent of Europe is “decided” in the 1750s. In Anievas and Nisancioglu’s account European hegemony is founded much earlier, in medieval feudalism. The capitalist mode of production seems inevitable in both arguments because they both follow a linear logic of technological modernization: in Pomeranz’ account the production of “land-intensive” goods on plantations in the colonial periphery by means of slave labour funds indirectly the development of the coal-fuelled metallurgy industry, which is a precondition for the construction of railways and steamships, which then reduce industrial production costs by reducing transportation costs and by speeding up production chains. Anievas and Nisancioglu share this understanding of technological progress. The acquisition of new technologies provided the feudal lords and later the colonial enterprises and factory owners with the possibility to increase their surpluses. As I have already outlined above, the capitalist mode of production in its feudal and colonial stages relied on the acquisition of land through war, and advanced technology was a condition for military success. The only major difference to Pomeranz is that Anievas and Nisancioglu locate the development of military and other technologies outside Europe.

The consequence of this shared “ontology of capital” is twofold. First, this logic objectifies the categories of China and Europe. That is, the initial decision to characterize them by the difference in the capital that they hold becomes self-evident and “objective,” because the outcome of their historical struggle, the

establishment of a hierarchy, proves their difference. The second consequence is that capitalism seems logical and coherent, while alternatives are erased from the analysis or they appear as utopian wishes in the far future. Alternatives and real contingencies are completely absent from Pomeranz' analysis. In his analysis, the mode of production and its logic of surplus generation and economic growth appear to be the same in Europe as in China. The reason for their different historical outcomes lies in their unequal access to resources and land. This universal logic of production objectifies the hierarchical relation between Europe and China and even justifies it. In contrast to Pomeranz, Anievas and Nisancioglu problematize the exploitation of the populations of colonized states by rich and powerful colonial states. But their alternative is obvious and clichéd: the oppressed and colonized workers need to stand up against their oppressors and reclaim the surplus they generate. This alternative is, essentially, a revolution of the *mode of distribution*: The capitalist class can be eliminated but the principles of their labour, the *mode of production*, will stay intact. The utopia of UCD is thus that of traditional revolutionary Marxism: the realization of proletarian labour without its exploitation.

In my opinion, a historical analysis of capitalism is of little use if it explains the present as a logical outcome of transhistorical laws of political economy. This kind of analysis uses history as an illustration of a theory, but not as its foundation. It revolves around the question of why historical inequalities evolved, but it does not find a truly critical answer, because the nature of this inequality is not questioned. What we need, then, is a critical historical scholarship that analyses the historical particularities of labour in capitalism. This kind of scholarship needs to reject the "distribution model" of traditional Marxism in order to successfully challenge modernization theory. If it does so, it may contribute much to our understanding of capitalist societies, their contradictions, weak points and, ultimately, the alternatives that can replace them.