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How the West Came to Rule: an Interview with Alexander Anievas

By George Souvlis
May 27, 2016

George Souvlis: Would you like to present yourself by focusing on the formative experiences (academic and political) that strongly influenced you?

AA: I think the first books that really got me into politics were Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* and William Blum's *Killing Hope*, which I read some time after graduating high school. Reading these books opened a door to a history I had previously known nothing about. You know growing up in the United States, you don't learn about the long and tortured history of US imperialism around the world; America was supposed to be a force for 'good' and stability in the world as you're taught in school. Obviously reading those books (among many others shortly thereafter) was an eye-opener to say the least. The impetus for my sudden interest in the history of US foreign interventions came after many extended discussions with my Uncle (Ralph Anievas) about US foreign policymaking during the 20th century. He really tuned me into a history that I was oblivious to. I wasn't a very good student growing up and was more or less political unengaged. But I had some interest in history and he knew a lot about that: he had studied International Relations as a graduate student, taught as adjunct for a while, and is just a very intellectual person all around. So he was a big influence on my early intellectual and political development.

The other central formative moment in my political and intellectual trajectory was the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and my experiences in the anti-war movement. I had come to

London for my undergraduate studies right after the 9/11 attacks. At that time, I would have probably described myself as a 'democratic socialist' (really a social democrat) with an interest in Frankfurt School Critical Theory which I got introduced to shortly after starting my undergraduate studies. I was against the invasion of Afghanistan, but not that politically involved at the time. However, as the anti-war movement began to develop in the lead up to the Iraq War, I started attending protests, political meetings and the sort. It was really a radicalizing experience, as the people that I would hear speaking out against the war and whom I most agreed with all tended to be Marxists so that sparked an interest in going back and reading the classics: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Bukharin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukács, Gramsci, etc. The New Imperialism literature (i.e. Harvey, Gowan, Callinicos, etc.) sparked by the Iraq War was also very influential on my thinking at the time.

At the same time, I was studying Russian and Soviet history and I became fascinated with the Bolshevik Revolution and the causes of its degeneration. Luckily my seminar teacher for one of the courses was a Marxist, Gonzo Pozo-Martin, and he encouraged my interest in the subject and Marxism more generally in a big way. My interest in the sociological consequences of international relations that would become a major focus of my later research also probably originated in studying up on the Bolshevik Revolution and its immediate aftermath. For whatever other reasons contributed to the degeneration of and subsequent Stalinist counter-revolution against the October Revolution, clearly the effects of 'the international' and 'Western' imperialism in particular were paramount.

GS: Your field of specialization is International Relations. Some years ago you wrote an article about the relation of the field with the title "The renaissance of historical materialism in international relations theory". Could you historicize this renaissance? Why did this happen?

AA: That was an introduction for a book I edited, *Marxism and World Politics* (2010). I think the reasons for the renewal of Marxist thinking in International Relations (IR) was in large part a result of some of the developments I noted above: particularly, the so-called return of US imperialism represented by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and, more generally, the apparent shift in US foreign policymaking under the Bush II administration toward more explicitly coercive forms of interventionism. Obviously, US (and 'Western') imperialism never went away despite all the hoo-ha about the 'pacifying' effects of globalization during the 1990s: it's useful to remember that the Clinton administration had engaged in more military interventions without declarations of war than any other US President in the 20th century. Nonetheless, the resurgence of more blatant forms of US military interventions as witnessed in Afghanistan, Iraq and the more general 'War on Terror' I think definitely played a part in the renewed interest in Marxist-inspired critiques in IR, and the Great Recession of 2007-9 accelerated this trend.

Of course, this trend was not at all uniform. In the US academy, as far as I'm aware, Marxism in IR remains at the critical fringes of the discipline despite the many excellent Marxist scholars working in the field. By contrast, in Canada and the UK, there did seem to be quite a revival in Marxist IR theory. In the UK academy, which I'm most familiar with, this revival was in part also due to the turn toward more historical sociological forms of analysis in British IR during the early 2000s and, relatedly, the cohort of PhD students that came out of the LSE under the influence of Fred Halliday and others. A number of these PhD students went on to write a

number of important works in the discipline which, among others, influenced and inspired subsequent Marxist IR scholars like myself.

GS: In one of your articles, ("The Uses and misuses of Uneven and Combined Development") you reclaim the utilization of the concept of Uneven and combined development -originally used by Trotsky around the turn of the 20th century- as an useful analytical tool in IR analysis. What does this concept mean and how can be useful in the field?

AA: Well, I certainly wasn't the first to reclaim Trotsky's concept of uneven and combined development for IR – the credit for that goes to Justin Rosenberg who first introduced the idea as a theory of international relations in his Isaac Deutscher Prize Lecture of 1994 entitled 'Isaac Deutscher and the Lost History of International Relations' (subsequently published in *New Left Review, I/215, 1996)* and, more systematically, in a 2006 piece 'Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?' *(European Journal of International Relations, 12/3).* The co-authored article (with Jamie Allinson) you mention was very much a response to and dialogue with Rosenberg's work which has sought to build upon Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development in furnishing a genuinely social theory of 'the international' (i.e. multiple societies). What does this exactly mean?

Well, the foundational assumption of the classical social theory tradition (from Karl Marx and Ferdinand Tönnies *to* Émile Durkheim and Max Weber) was that the character of any given society's development is determined by its internal structures and agents. It was this very conception of the internal history of societies that in fact gave rise to sociology itself (see, among others, Friedrich Tenbruck 1994, 'Internal History of Society or Universal History', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 11: 75–93). For while the interactions between societies may not be viewed as *empirically* inconsequential, they are not themselves an object of social theory: that is to say, 'the international' essentially remained a contingent factor external to the basic premises of social theory. And this absence of any substantive theoretical conception of 'the international' persists to this day, including within Marxism. Whether the particular Marxist approach conceptualizes social systems as operating primarily at the domestic or world level—as exemplified by Political Marxism and World Systems Analysis, respectively—the dilemma remains the same. By working outwards from a conception of a specific social structure (be it feudalism, capitalism, socialism or whatever), the theorization of 'the international' takes the form of a reimagining of domestic society *writ large*: an extrapolation from analytical categories derived from a society conceived in the singular form.

Conversely, in the discipline of International Relations (IR), the theoretical focus is precisely on this international dimension of social existence missed by various social theories. Yet, rather than conceptualizing this international aspect as a distinct but organic dimension of the social world, political realist theories of IR have made the exact opposite mistake from the classical sociology tradition: that is, to abstract 'the international' from its social-historical contexts therefore reifying geopolitics into a timeless 'supra-social' sphere of great power politics.

So, the idea behind reconstructing Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development as a general theory of world history is that it holds the potential to transcend this theoretical divide between 'social' and 'geopolitical' modes of explanations by reconceptualizing 'the

international' as an object of social theory. Moreover, it does so in a way that allows for the theoretical and empirical incorporation of the non-Western sources, agents and dynamics driving world history that breaks with Eurocentrism. As demonstrated in my co-authored book (with Kerem Nisancioglu) *How the West Came to Rule*, these 'extra-European' geopolitical conditions and forms of agency were in fact central to the making of the origins of capitalism in Europe and the 'rise of the West' over the *longue durée*.

By positing the differentiated character of development as its 'most general law', Trotsky's concept of uneven development thus provides a necessary corrective to any singular conception of society and its associated unilinear conceptions of history that underpin Eurocentric accounts. By positing the intrinsically interactive character of this multiplicity, combined development in turn challenges the methodological internalism of Eurocentric approaches while the very concept of combination denotes that there has never existed any pure or normative model of development. As such, the theory of uneven and combined development fundamentally destabilizes the methodological internalism and Eurocentrism of the social theory tradition by theoretically registering the interactive and variegated character of development, while rejecting any reified conceptualisation of 'the universal' as an *a priori* property of an internally conceived homogeneous entity (see also, Kamran Matin's *Recasting Iranian Modernity*).

GS: Your work- to a certain extent- has built upon the strand of Political Marxism, especially on the work of Robert Brenner. At the same time, it moves beyond it by reconstructing several aspects of it. Could you present us more precisely your criticisms towards the tradition of Political Marxism by focusing on the transition debate and the issue of the rise of the west? Did it happen different from what these scholars have presented?

AA: The framing of your question is interesting as you're quite correct that my work has been influenced by Political Marxist scholars like Brenner, Teschke, Lacher and others, though it's also been critical of the Political Marxist tradition broadly speaking. Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood's work really got me interested in the 'transition debate' in the first place, so perhaps it's kind of natural that they'd be both a central object of critique and influence. I think Brenner's writings in particular are excellent on a number of levels – particularly his more archival-based and historically focused works like *Merchants and Revolution*. And in my 'home' discipline of IR, some of the most exciting studies coming out over the last couple decades have been from Political Marxists. Charlie Post's writings on the transition to capitalism in the US have also been quite ground-breaking in my opinion.

So in my co-authored book, *How the West Came to Rule*, we do draw on a number of key Political Marxist concepts (particularly, Brenner's 'rules of reproduction' and 'geopolitical accumulation'). And we also build upon certain aspects of Brenner's historical account of the transition to capitalism, such as his focus on the Netherlands and England as the first two states where capitalist social relations were fully consolidated, and the significance of the particularly homogenous character of the ruling class in the latter's transition (though we provide a different explanation for this).

But, as noted, we also criticize Political Marxist explanations of the transition, specifically in regards to their impeccably 'internalist' account of the rise of the capitalism which focuses

almost exclusively on the English countryside. We argue that this kind of methodologically internalist approach is not so much wrong, as it is incomplete. For, as we demonstrate throughout the book, the origins of capitalism in England (as well as in the Low Countries) was fundamentally rooted within and conditioned by various 'extra-European' structural factors and forms of agency.

So, to give you a few examples: to understand why both European feudalism was in the grips of a generalized crisis in the 14th century and what factors explain why certain Western European societies were capable of breaking out of this crisis in taking the first steps towards capitalism, you have to look at, as we do in Chapter 3, the wider geopolitical and economic linkages being forged over the Eurasian landmass with the expansion of the Mongol Empire. For the creation of the *Pax Mongolica* had the effect of plugging European actors into a nascent 'world system' of increasingly dense intersocietal relations. And the immediate consequence of European engagements in the *Pax Mongolica* was an increased exposure to the technical developments and ideas pioneered by the more scientifically advanced Asia. While these contributed to an array of developments in Europe, the *Pax Mongolica* also proved to be a transmitter not of only social relations and technologies, but also disease. The Black Death, and the subsequent demographic reordering which brought European feudalism into crisis, directly stemmed from this widened sphere of intersocietal interactions.

We then demonstrate in Chapter 4 that the subsequent divergences that occurred within Europe were a product of the 'super-power' rivalry between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. Through sustained military pressure over the Long 16th Century, the Ottomans further undermined existing centres of feudal ruing class power – such as the papacy, the Habsburg Empire, the Italian city-states – while supporting new counter-hegemonic forces, such as the Protestants, French, and the Dutch. The Ottomans also acted as a geopolitical centre of gravity, attracting the Habsburg's military resources to the Mediterranean and Central East Europe. This in turn provided the structural geopolitical space that proved crucial to the Netherlands and England's ability to engage in modern state building practices and develop along increasingly capitalist lines – for the former process, think here of the Dutch Revolt.

Specifically in regards to the English situation, the Ottomans unintentionally created for them a condition of geopolitical 'isolation', which directly contributed to the unusually unified character of the English ruling class and in turn its success in enclosing and engrossing land. This process of primitive accumulation in the English countryside engendering capitalist property relations that Brenner and Wood so brilliantly examine was therefore directly tied to the geopolitical threat of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, the Ottoman's dominance of the Mediterranean and land routes to Asia served to push Northwestern European states onto an altogether novel global sphere of activity – the Atlantic – which had crucial effects on the particular trajectory of both the English and Dutch as they consolidated themselves into distinctly capitalist states.

Indeed, as we examine in Chapter 5, it was the plundering of American resources by European colonialists that further exacerbated an already nascent divergence between the feudalism of the Iberian Empires and the incipient capitalisms of these Northwestern European societies. In particular, we argue that the development of capitalism in England was itself dependent on the widened sphere of economic activity offered by the Atlantic. For it was through the sociological

combination of American land, African slave labour and English merchant capital that the limits of English agrarian capitalism were eventually overcome. Not only did the enlarged sphere of circulation provided by the transatlantic triangular trade offer numerous opportunities for British capitalists to expand their scope of activity, but the combination of different labour processes across the Atlantic enabled the recomposition of labour in Britain through the Industrial Revolution.

We can see a similar (though in no way identical process) situation playing out in the Dutch Republic during the 16th and 17th century through their colonies in Southeast Asia. This witnessed the Dutch East India Company overcoming the crisis in the supply of domestic labour-power that threatened to choke-off the Netherlands' agrarian capitalist development by tapping into the vast well of unfree labour-power in Asia (see Chapter 7). So those are just a few of the 'extra-European' historical processes and dynamics left out of Political Marxist accounts that we argue were critical to the origins and development of capitalism in Europe.

GS: In your study Capital, the State, and War *you conceptualize the era between the two wars as multidimensional crisis. Would you like to tell us a bit more about this?*

AA: What I meant by conceptualizing the era of the two World Wars as a multidimensional crisis was that the fundamental characteristics of the international politics of the period, conceived in its totality, were constituted by three distinct, but intersecting, conflictual axes: (1) a 'vertical' axis represented by the class conflicts between labour and capital; (2) a 'horizontal' axis capturing the relations of competition and rivalry among 'many capitals'; and, (3) a 'lateral' axis constituted by the geopolitical and military rivalries among the states within the Global North and the various relations of domination and exploitation of the Global North over the Global South. From this perspective, the book aimed to offer a historical sociological re-interpretation of the origins, nature and dynamics of the epoch of the two World Wars in terms of Gramsci's concept of 'organic crisis': that is, the combination of a *structural* and *conjunctural* crisis of the hegemony of capitalism simultaneously taking socioeconomic ('material') and ideo-political ('ideational') forms articulated along national, international, and transnational lines – the latter being experienced during the interwar years in the form of a 'class war' waged from both above and below traversing the nation-states making up the international system. As I argued in the book, this 'early' Cold War of the interwar period essentially laid the geopolitical and ideological conditions directly leading to the Second World War.

GS: The Marxian anayltical category of "bourgeois revolution" has become trendy again in the light of new studies like that of Neil Davidson. Has this concept something still to offer to historians? Which are its main limitations and in which ways we can push the historical research some steps further?

AA: Yes, I do think the category of 'bourgeois revolution' is still an important analytical concept in understanding the emergence and consolidation of capitalist states. And, of course, Neil Davidson's work has been central to recovering the concept in Marxist theory against the revisionist historiographical onslaught of the last few decades.

As Davidson's 'consequentialist' conceptualization of bourgeois revolutions demonstrates, once you re-orient the analytical focus away from the particular intentions or composition of the agents involved in the making of revolutions to the *effects* of such revolutions on the rise and consolidation of distinctly capitalist states (conceived as more or less sovereign sites of capital accumulation), then the concept is indeed invaluable. This then shifts the definitional content of the concept from the class that makes the revolution to the effects a revolution has in promoting and/or consolidating a capitalist form of state which will in turn benefit the capitalist class irrespective of any role they may play in such revolution.

The main limitation of Davidson and others consequentalist interpretation of the concept, however, has been their tendency to over-emphasize 'developmental identity' over 'developmental difference' in examining the very different types of revolutions that have occurred over the modern period. In other words, in the shift to conceptualizing revolutions in terms of their particular socio-political effects, they have fallen into a problematic homogenization of nearly all revolutions in the modern epoch as essentially capitalist as such revolutions came to incorporate elements of capitalism into their social structures. From this perspective, the very different developmental outcomes of revolutions in, say, North Vietnam (1945), China (1949), and Cuba (1959) are all conceived as establishing more or less similar variants of 'bureaucratic state capitalism' through 'deflected permanent revolutions' – the 'modern version or functional equivalent' of bourgeois revolutions, as Davidson has argued. While I think it's correct to argue that such regimes increasingly assimilated significant features of capitalism over time, to conceive of these revolutions as simply 'bourgeois' is, I believe, to stretch the concept beyond breaking point.

GS: Is the USA still the global indisputable hegemon or it is in a process of decline as many commentators suggest? Do you see any other megapower to seriously contest american hegemony? Does it make sense to speak about "american imperialism"? To what extent does it differ from the prior forms of it? Is Obama's governance an exception regarding this issue in comparison with the previous governments or does it duplicate them?

AA: I think we've certainly seen signs of the relative decline of US power over the last two decades. For me, the two water-shed events in this respect was the inability or unwillingness to project US military power abroad during the Russia-George conflict in the summer of 2008 and the Great Recession of 2007-2009 which the US (and world) economy still hasn't really recovered from. And certainly the inability of state managers to adequately project US military power around the world has alot to do with the longer-term geopolitical and economic consequences of the failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

So, yes, US power and hegemony over the past two decades has been in relative decline, though whether this trajectory continues is a much more open question. We may indeed be in a moment of transition from a hegemonic to non-hegemonic geopolitical order. However, unlike some other commentators' suggestions, I don't see any other state at the moment (or in the medium-term) accumulating the kind of military, economic and ideological power – all three of which are necessary for the reconstitution of a new hegemon at the international level – that would allow them to fundamentally challenge the US as the dominant world power.

A plausible scenario that could play out is the emergence of a more de-centered geopolitical order, constituted by various regional 'great powers' or perhaps even hegemons in different parts of the world. Within such a potential order, the likes of China, India, Russia and possibly Brazil and Iran could play a role, as would the US probably continue to do so, albeit in a more hobbled form, in relation to Europe. But it's also plausible that a very different scenario could play out which is more akin to what happened after the Vietnam War, where US power fell into a period of relative decline after which it was more or less reconsolidated during the 1980s and 1990s. I think the former scenario of a more de-centered geopolitical order is slightly more likely, though I have serious doubts about whether the likes of China and India can sustain anything approximating the kind of growth rates we've seen over the last 20 years or so – indeed, in the case of China, it already looks like it won't be able to.

On the question of whether it makes sense to speak about US 'imperialism', the answer is an emphatic yes. Whether under the guise of 'humanitarian intervention' or the global 'War on Terror', the default setting of US foreign policymaking is military and economic interventionism around the world. At the most general level, the overriding aim of US foreign policy strategy since around the turn of the 20th century has been to facilitate the ceaseless accumulation of capital buttressed through an ever-expanding "open" world economic system. This is what the famous American historian William Appleman Williams termed the 'Open Door'. And, contrary to both 'realist' critics and 'liberal' advocates, this grand strategy of US imperialism has always entailed a sometimes uneasy but potent mix of unilateral and multilateral tactics irrespective of the ideological disposition or party affiliation of any single administration. In short: 'multilateralism when possible, unilateralism when necessary'.

None of this has changed under the Obama administration. The continuities in US grand strategy under the Obama administration vis-à-vis past administrations far outweigh any differences. While one can point to some minor differences in foreign policy *tactics* between the three post-Cold War US administration, for example, really it's the strong continuities in strategic goals that stand out (for a very good recent study on this, see Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn and Naná de Graaff's *American Grand Strategy and Elite Corporate Networks*). And even these tactical differences are often exaggerated.

Under the Obama administration, Bush/Cheney's 'War on Terror' has not only continued, but expanded, while the spurious legal arguments made by Obama's predecessors in legitimizing the 'War on Terror' (and, in particular, the war in Iraq) have been adopted wholesale by the current administration and, in certain cases, even further codified into international law. Similarly, Obama has employed a shifting mix of unilateral and multilateral tactics (as witnessed during the Libyan intervention), with the former becoming even more prominent during his second term (for an earlier analysis of some of these developments, see Alexander Anievas, Adam Fabry and Robert Knox 2012, 'Back to Normality? US Foreign Policy under Obama'). So while Obama may have been successful in momentarily changing the 'diplomatic mood music' (as Tariq Ali aptly put it) of the inconvenient truths of unbridled US imperialism uttered by the swaggering cowboys of the Bush administration, he's done very little, if anything, to change the fundamental character or aims of US foreign policy.

GS: Do you see any glimmer of hope in the candidacy of Bernie Sanders for the revival of the American left?

AA: Yes maybe, but it really depends on what happens to the movement that has coalesced around the Sanders presidency after the primary and general election. I think the real long-term significance of the Sanders campaign for the potential renewal of the US left is not necessarily whether he wins the election – though, clearly, that could also be important in and of itself. But, rather, whether his campaign acts as a further catalyst for and expansion of the kinds of broader-based grassroots organizing from below that has played such an important role in the campaign; and, moreover, that it could do so in a way that is both more self-sustaining than many previous left-wing movements and, even more importantly, moves beyond the politics of the ballot-box. I mean, any sober critical analysis of Sander's actual policy positions shows that he's really just an old school New Deal Democrat. Indeed, in the political context of the 1950s and 60s, he would have been considered a moderate Democrat. But, since the reconstruction of Democratic Party inaugurated by the New Clintonian Democrats of 1990s, he's now viewed as something of a radical, which he – unlike many others on the 'progressive' wing of the Democrat Party – more or less embraces by describing himself as a 'democratic socialist' (i.e. Scandinavian-style Social Democrat).

So while his policy positions are surely better and more to left than a Hilary Clinton or most other center-right New Democrats, the real hope in his candidacy for revitalizing the American left – and, in particular, small 'c' communist or socialist politics – is the possible longer-term effects it could have on both generalizing and consolidating grassroots politics from below that operates within and outside electoral politics while shifting the broader political discourse to the left. I think the Sanders campaign has already more or less achieved the latter effect, though we'll see whether it can bring about the former. One promising sign that it might, is that Sanders and his campaign has time and again articulated a case for continuing to build a grassroots movement from below with the aim to put pressure on whoever the next President might be. I think is a very important argument, and it does somewhat distinguish Sanders' campaign from previous 'left-wing populist' presidential bids like Howard Dean in 2004 or Dennis Kucinich in 2004 and 2008. But, if Sanders loses the primary election and then turns around and says, 'hey, it was a great run, but I lost so now everyone go out and campaign for Clinton' and that's it, then he'll likely squander a huge opportunity in rebuilding the US left.