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Author(s): J. M. Blaut

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COLONIALISM AND THE RISE OF CAPITALISM

J. M. BLAUT

THE PROBLEM OF EXPLAINING the rise of capitalism out of feudalism may be considerably less difficult than we Marxists have thought it to be. For conservatives it has never been much of a problem at all. A century ago it seemed obvious that a Christian god would guide His people to civilization and modernity — and thus of course to capitalism — either directly, via the March of the World Spirit, or indirectly, by slipping good ideas into the heads of good Christians, who thereby became uniquely intelligent and progressive, or, even more indirectly, by supplying Europeans with better heredity than non-Europeans, or with a better natural environment. All quite simple. The rise of Europe was something to be taken for granted. It was not a problem, except as a matter of detail, of determining which aspect of European society had been the leading force in modernization.

The rise of Europe was viewed in those days as one part of a great world-scale diffusion process, a conception that we now describe as Eurocentric diffusionism. This doctrine, which became codified around the middle of the nineteenth century mainly as a rationalization and support for colonialism, is quite complex and elaborate, but its core is the following set of straightforward propositions: (1) Europe naturally progresses and modernizes. (2) Non-Europe naturally remains stagnant, traditional, unchanging. (3) The essential reason for progressive cultural evolution in Europe is some force or factor which is ultimately intellectual or spiritual. (4) Progress comes to non-Europe only through the diffusion of European ideas, institutions, and people — that is, through colonialism. In this doctrine non-Europeans have of course nothing to do with the rise of Europe and of capitalism, so European historical theorizing tends to constrain itself in a form of historical tunnel-vision, a dif-

fusionist tunnel history: we do not have to look at events that took place outside of Europe (except to make invidious comparisons); we simply look back down the European tunnel of time to decide what, within that space, caused what, and when (Blaut, 1987a; 1987b).

Diffusionism is still, today, the foundation-theory for conservative beliefs about the rise of Europe and the “modernization” (read “civilization”) of the Third World. Today it is accepted because colonialism, in various modern forms, remains a central and basic interest of the European elite, and it is still necessary to explain and rationalize a system by which European capital exploits non-European labor, mainly (but not only) for the purpose of persuading European populations that this exploitation is right, rational, and historically natural, and so persuade them to support the policies, pay the bills, and willingly endure the blood sacrifices. And today, still, an important component of this interest-bound theory is its tunnel-historical conception of the European past. It is still critically important to demonstrate that European social evolution has always been self-generated, owing nothing important to the non-European world, that Europe (or rather Western Europe, “the West”) has always been, and remains today, ahead of the rest of the world in level and rate of development, that its economic system, capitalism, is the core of its uniquely progressive character, and that progress for the non-European world can only come via the diffusion of European-based multinational capitalism.

Diffusionism and tunnel history are rooted in the interests of a class community, and are propagated by scholars who work for and identify with that class. One does not have to question the honesty or competence of these scholars, or dismiss their work as erroneous or flawed — most of it is not — to conclude that the theories which they put forward about European and non-European history are in principle questionable: all require to be examined from the perspective of the class interests of other communities, working-class and non-European. Some of these theories will turn out to be valid, others will not. The body of ideas as a whole, however, will change very markedly, and we will find ourselves abandoning all of the propositions which assert that Europeans are better or bolder or brighter than non-Europeans, and Europe is and always has been more advanced and more

progressive than non-Europe. This holds true most pointedly for theories about the rise of Europe, and the rise of capitalism within Europe.

We Marxist scholars have partial immunity to diffusionist tunnel history. We do not share the class interests which underlie it and which give it its hidden forms of validation. We are pretty much free of Eurocentric chauvinism: we belong to a tradition which insists on the absolute equality of all human beings, and we identify with a social movement which is worldwide and pan-cultural. But our immunity is not complete, because we were trained in a diffusionist tradition and we work in communities of primarily non-Marxist scholars in which diffusionist and tunnel-historical statements and theories are considered to be unquestionably valid. As students we had to, in effect, demonstrate that we accepted the validity of these propositions; failure to do so was interpreted by our professors as proof that we simply did not understand the propositions and were therefore obviously unfit to be licensed and employed as scholars. At an even more basic level, we learned as children to believe in European superiority and some of these notions stay with us as unconscious, implicit, beliefs throughout our lives. ("We" includes scholars from colonial as well as metropolitan societies.) So in the end we Marxist scholars have a peculiar problem which is also a marvelous opportunity: we need to review everything we have learned in our fields and winnow out all of the Eurocentric chaff. This is a task that is intellectually fascinating, and it should not be very difficult since we are competent scholars and we have no class interest in Eurocentrism.

But the task appears difficult in regard to this one problem, the matter of explaining the rise of capitalism. We start with the stubborn, undeniable fact that capitalism rose to power in Europe and nowhere else. How can a Marxist explain that fact without conceding some evolutionary superiority to Europeans? Marx and Engels went about as far toward a non-diffusionist answer to this question as any scholar could go in their place and time, given that available knowledge about the non-European world was wholly diffusionist, most of it provided by the agents and agencies of colonialism and thus reflecting the explicit interest of denying that colonial peoples had political histories entailing sovereignty, legal systems defining and protecting property rights, and the

like. Marx and Engels could not avoid believing that non-European peoples — about whom, to repeat, they knew almost nothing — betrayed a lack of modernity and lack of social progress. But Marx and Engels knew that theories which explain evolution in terms of ideas, supposed intellectual and moral qualities favoring innovativeness, progressiveness, and the like, are elitist and false (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1846]). Thus they concluded, wrongly but not unreasonably in the circumstances, that the problem lay, not in the minds or cultures of non-Europeans, but in the natural environment. Asian societies stagnated because Asia was too dry for non-irrigated agriculture. This led to a dependence on irrigation, hence to a special sort of irrigation-managing but not truly class-based state in counterposition to non-class peasant communities, hence to an absence of class struggle and thus of progress.¹ Tropical regions — I infer that this was meant to include Africa — do not develop towards capitalism because here “Nature is too lavish. . . . She does not impose upon [man] any necessity to develop himself” (Marx, 1976 [1867], 513). These geographical notions — that Asia is dry and tropical regions are bountiful — were widely held by early 19th-century geographers (including Marx’s professor at Berlin), but in the 20th century they are no longer taken seriously, even by the bourgeoisie.

Later Marxists tended to skirt the problem, probably because they, like Marx and Engels, were unwilling to concede any cultural or mental superiority to Europeans, yet were unable to get around the stubborn fact that it was indeed Europe that developed capitalism. This kind of attitude is evident in the contributions to the classic “transition to capitalism” exchange in this journal in the early 1950s (reprinted in Hilton, 1976). I am inclined, however, to treat these earlier views as part of the pre-history of the problem, because the problem itself could not be tackled directly until we knew a great deal more about the non-European past than we did at the time of that exchange, and therefore could concretely decide what indeed was Eurocentric chaff and what was usable knowledge. We did not reach that point

1 See Marx, 1979 [1853]; Engels, 1975 [1853]. Certainly Engels discarded this thesis (the “Asiatic Mode of Production,” etc.) in late writings. Its absence from *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [1884] (Marx and Engels, 1970) is conspicuous and diagnostic.

before the period of decolonization and the rise of anti-imperialist scholarship in the Tricontinent. But new standards have to be applied when we examine Marxist statements about this problem which have been made since that time. Attempts today to theorize about the rise of capitalism — and about feudalism, slavery, the so-called “Asiatic mode of production,” and matters of this sort — without taking into account what is now known about non-European history, have to be strongly criticized. Unfortunately, many of the recent contributions deserve this criticism. Three examples will suffice to make the point.

Perry Anderson, in *Lineages of the Absolute State*, recounts the standard diffusionist view, simply declaring it to be Marxist (Anderson, 1974, 397–431). European antiquity was distinguished by a uniquely “critical,” “rational,” “analytical,” “scientific” (etc.) kind of mind; this then led to a uniquely “dynamic” medieval society with all of the well-known Weberian virtues of individualism, freedom, urbanization, and the rest, plus a uniquely non-autocratic polity, plus “remarkable” agricultural productivity; and so, quite naturally, came capitalism.

Roger Gottlieb, in a 1984 article which rekindled the “transition to capitalism” discussion in *Science & Society* (Gottlieb, 1984), argues that the transition cannot really be explained in any “hard” or definite way, and that, indeed, Marxism should not expect to find internal laws of motion for modes of production other than competitive capitalism. Gottlieb sees the rise of capitalism as the product of a long list of contributing but non-determinant factors, including feudal fragmentation, class struggle, the development of “civil society,” technology, urbanization, and an expanding market, factors which he believes were operating within Europe and not in other societies — but these other societies are not at all discussed, nor is it noticed that some of these “factors” were present in non-European societies and some, in fact, diffused from them into Europe. (Later, replying to criticism, Gottlieb [1987, 189] conceded that non-Europeans had comparable technology in the Middle Ages, but this merely “testifies to the indeterminacy of historical development.”)

Gottlieb’s argument provoked a vigorous reply by David Laibman (1984; 1987), who could not allow Gottlieb’s rejection of determinate laws of social evolution, and primacy of the mode of production, to go unchallenged. In mounting the challenge, Laib-

man produced his own theory of the “transition,” this one consisting basically of two very peculiar theses. First, the Marxist theory of social evolution in class society, with its mechanism for the rise, decline, and replacement of class modes of production, cannot be questioned (as Gottlieb questions it) with merely empirical facts about particular societies in particular periods and places. This is so because historical materialism is not an empirical theory: it is true as “synthetic a priori” (*fide* Kant). This privileged status, above the merely empirical, also solves the problem of explaining why the transition to capitalism occurred in Europe and nowhere else. The problem, says Laibman, is in the realm of contingency, not theory, so (in effect) it is something to describe, not explain. (Whether much is gained by rescuing Marxist theory from eclecticism, factor analysis, and a denial of the primacy of class struggle by replacing these with neo-Kantian dualism is a question I do not have to discuss.) Laibman’s second step is to descend into that very realm of contingency and so produce an explanation for the European rise of capitalism. Historical materialism, in his view, is most fundamentally a theory about the development of the productive forces. Therefore, he argues (Laibman, 1984, 284), social evolution should occur most rapidly in places where the productive forces can develop effectively. This will not happen in Asia, where we find “difficult natural conditions,” nor in Africa, where “nature’s providence” produces an “abundance blockage.” But Europe (said Goldilocks) is just right. This is old-fashioned environmental determinism.

Many other formulations have been put forward in recent years, and not all of them are Eurocentric. Some Marxists argue simply that the whole matter of Europe was an accident. The fact that the bourgeois revolutions occurred first in Europe reflected merely a temporary and minor regional variation in a general evolutionary process that was occurring in many parts of the Eastern Hemisphere. Europe had briefly and slightly taken the lead, as other societies had done previously, rather as one runner may forge into the lead in a race and soon be overtaken by another. But capitalism being capitalism, once it had gained power in one part of the world it developed so explosively, and did so in such a characteristically centrifugal way, that no other society stood a chance of effectuating its own bourgeois revolution: in effect, Europe crossed the finish line first and the race was over.

The obvious difficulty with this argument lies in the fact that it reduces a profound social revolution to the level of a minor, almost accidental, regional variation.

Another theory, associated particularly with Samir Amin, accepts one part of the traditional view, the idea that medieval Europe was more prone to change than other societies, but explains this as being a result of Europe's geographically marginal location on the edge of the hemispheric zone of civilization (Amin, 1976, 1980, 1985). Being at the edge, Europe did not develop the institutions of feudal-tributary society as fully as did many other regions; hence this form of society in Europe was more fragile and more easily broken down by class struggles. There are two evident difficulties here. First, the main heir to Roman civilization cannot be considered marginal in a social or geographical sense, any more than the heir to ancient Han can be considered marginal on the other side of the hemisphere. Second, this theory, in spite of the fact that it denies all superiority to Europeans and thus forcefully responds to Eurocentrism, still accepts that one proposition about Europe's supposedly unique "dynamism."

In this essay I will put forward a theory which is considerably more radical in its interpretation of medieval and early-modern history. It is a theory which, I believe, emerges quite naturally — I would almost say inevitably — in the period when Marxists begin to connect the problem of the rise of capitalism in Europe to the findings of post-colonial scholarship dealing with the medieval and early-modern history and historical geography of Asia, Africa, and Latin America including the Caribbean. The crux of this theory is a pair of propositions: (1) Prior to the 16th century, Europe had absolutely *no* advantage over Africa and Asia as to level and rate of development out of feudalism and toward capitalism, a process that was going on in many regions of the Eastern Hemisphere. The fact that Europeans reached the Western Hemisphere before Africans or Asians did so is a reflection only of location (accessibility), not level of development. (2) The conquest of America and exploitation of Americans provided European protocapitalists (merchants, artisans, acquisitive landlords, freehold peasants, and others) with massive capital accumulation which they used to dissolve feudal relations in Europe, destroy competing protocapitalist communities outside of

Europe, and thus acquire the ability to gain political power in northwestern Europe. This was the “transition from feudalism to capitalism,” although it was not really a transition but rather an unconformity between two historical horizons, a still-feudal society (undergoing fairly rapid decay — though not only in Europe) and a pre-industrial capitalist society, rising quite suddenly after 1492. Nor was this a transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. We have to explain the political triumph of capitalism, the bourgeois revolution of the 17th century, as a distinct problem, and thereafter must see how the further development of capitalism-in-power permitted it to reach the point where unlimited expansion of productive capacity becomes a realistic possibility and thus a technological revolution in the methods of production becomes necessary. This did not happen before the late 18th century, well after the end of the story we are telling here.

Each of the two propositions must stand on its own feet. Either European protocapitalism in 1492 was more developed than that of Asia and Africa, or it was not. If not, then we need a second proposition, a strong theory to explain why the bourgeois revolution occurred in Europe less than two centuries later. In this essay I will defend each proposition in turn.

What, precisely, am I trying to explain, and what am I not trying to explain? I am *not* trying to build a general theory explaining how and why feudalism became transformed into capitalism. I *am* trying to explain why capitalism rose first in Europe. But the theory being defended here, that 16th- and 17th-century colonialism is responsible for the centration of rising capitalism in Europe and for a quickening of that rise, must affect the general theory of the transformation in a number of ways. For one thing, the problem simplifies itself, because no longer do we search in medieval European history for a *sufficient* cause for the fact that capitalism triumphed in the 17th century, since we now claim that the triumph would not have taken place until much later (and perhaps somewhere else or in many places at once) had it not been for the exogenous facts of early colonialism. For another thing, we no longer bind ourselves to the European forms of the explanatory variables. We argue in essence that the triumph of capitalism occurred in Europe not because of uniquely European facts but because of colonialism. So non-European forms of feudal landholdings, unfree labor, medieval pro-

tocapitalism, and much more become legitimate variables for the general theory. But the most critical implication, in my view, is this: historical materialism postulates an evolutionary process in human society as a whole, not in just one of its communities, and the position argued here is consistent with that project. Marx used data from the European community to illustrate the evolutionary process, not to define it, and we should do the same.

EVEN DEVELOPMENT IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

There is abundant evidence that profound cultural change was taking place throughout the Eastern Hemisphere during the period which Europeans and others think of as the Middle Ages. In terms of modes of production, it seems that the directions of change and the rates of change were quite similar over many parts of the hemisphere, and, if we speak at the level of continents, over all three continents. On a hemispheric scale, feudalism was declining, and in many small regions, mainly urban and principally maritime-oriented, a kind of primitive capitalism or incipient capitalism or protocapitalism (as I will call it here) was emerging. In all three continents there were many large zones occupied by agricultural societies with antagonistic classes, basically peasants and landlord-rulers, sometimes with other class-sectors interwoven into the structure but not dominating it. In all these areas there was forced extraction of surplus from peasants, although the form and intensity of exploitation differed, sometimes taking the form of serfdom, sometimes of tenant farming with rent paid as labor, produce, or cash (but always with compelled payment), and sometimes — usually at the frontier with non-class communities — of tribute. Because the producing class was always to some degree unfree while the ruling class was always the owner (in some places, contingent owner) of land, the principal means of production, and since the ruling class exploited the producers, these societies were dominated by a common mode of production, which most Marxists would call feudalism — of course detaching the mode of production from the unique superstructural features of European feudalism. Possibly half of Africa, half of geographical Europe, and half of southern, southeastern, and eastern Asia were dominated by the feudal mode of production in the 15th century.

The ruling class, in feudal societies, is a landlord class. In some regions the landlords held titles indicative of hereditary status, but the distinction between nobility and gentry has no evolutionary significance and both forms were widespread across the hemisphere (Blaut, 1976). It is also true that in all these societies there were parallel high-status groups, clergy, bureaucrats, military people, etc., but there seems not to have been any case of a large, clearly feudal society — I exclude a few cases of small urbanized power centers in dry, pastoral regions, and a few large cities — in which wealth and status was clearly divorced from land ownership and from the surplus extracted from peasants. Much effort has been wasted by Marxists who accept Max Weber's distinction between feudal and service tenures (a thesis meant to show that Asian societies couldn't evolve private property, and capitalism) as a basis for claiming that feudalism did not exist in non-European regions. Both forms of tenure existed inside and outside Europe. European feudal lords, Chinese gentry, Hindu fief-holders, even Mughal *jagirdars* who had been granted fiefs on service tenure and quickly farmed them out, or converted them into private, heritable property, all displayed the classical features of a landlord class. In any case, holders of land on conditional tenure might move from fief to fief but always *held* a fief and milked it of surplus for their private benefit; and, in most regions, service grants sooner or later became private property (Blaut, 1976). (On hereditary fiefs and private property in Asia, see e.g. Chandra, 1981; Elvin, 1973; Liceria, 1974; Nurul Hasan, 1969; Sharma, 1965; Thapar, 1982; Yadava, 1966.)

The so-called "European manorial system" is sometimes said to have been a distinguishing feature of feudalism, a peculiarly European giant-step toward private ownership and large-scale labor use, absent from non-European areas and critical in the evolution toward capitalism. Large estates were widespread across the hemisphere, but the special organizational form of demesne farming by unpaid peasant labor was found in fewer areas (including part of India: see, e.g., L. Gopal, 1963; Mahalingam, 1951). However, demesne farming was not dominant throughout Europe (it was uncommon in the Mediterranean zone), and in Western Europe it had died out basically by the 14th century. Large estates producing on a centralized organizational basis for

commerce, in essence plantations, were found however in many regions, sometimes with wage labor, so the demesne system confers no advantage or distinction on European feudalism.

The producing class in feudalism consists, usually, of peasants, who farm the landlord's estate in household-scale units and provide labor, produce, or cash as rent. Serfdom is often thought to be the characteristic labor form of feudalism, on the European model (Dobb, 1947). Serfs of the basically European sort were indeed found here and there in Africa and Asia (Yadava, 1974), although the specific history of enserfment in late-Roman Europe was unique and its legal form was rarely encountered elsewhere. What we find rather is a panorama of forms of unfree labor, that is, labor of peasants tied somehow to the landlord's estate, through all three continents. On the other hand, some scholars rather idealize the European peasant of the 14th and 15th centuries in Western Europe and see in that person a capitalist farmer, imbued with the entrepreneurial spirit, etc. (Brenner, 1982; Baechler, 1987). This is merely a telescoping of history. Those peasants were tenants, still tied to estates in manifold ways; not until later times, well after 1492, was there a strong emergence of an important capital-accumulating, kulak-style class, ready for rural capitalism. The European peasant was not particularly unusual. Nor was the European peasant village. Marx accepted the old European notion — colonialist and diffusionist — that Indian villages were closed, corporate entities, hence survivals of communal society and not components of a class society. The medieval Indian village did indeed have corporate characteristics; it did have communal usufruct control (not usually communal ownership); and it did display the tight combination of farming and handicrafts which so impressed Marx and seemed to him to explain, in part, the cohesiveness of the village, its ability to resist the impinging forces of colonialism. But as Habib points out, this village form was in fact created in early-medieval India; it was not a survival from the period of pre-class communal society (Habib, 1965). And European villages also retained corporate characteristics (see Thrupp, 1972), perhaps even more pronounced than those possessed by Indian villages (where, in Hindu areas, caste communities correlated very poorly with settlement forms). The break-up of the European village generally occurred around the time of and after the

bourgeois revolutions, and reflected the rise of capitalism. The medieval European village seems not to have been very unusual among the array of village settlement types across the hemisphere.

There was a measure of interconnectedness among the feudal agricultural societies, enough to suggest that we should think of the whole hemisphere-wide zone of class-based agricultural societies as a single feudal landscape with regional variations that sometimes included sharp boundaries and sometimes did not. Clearly there was a great deal of criss-cross diffusion among these regions, as evidenced for instance by the commonality of agricultural techniques over large areas. (The claim by some European historians, including White, 1968, and Mann, 1987, and echoed by Anderson, 1974, that medieval European agriculture was unique in technological level and thus somehow ignited progress toward capitalism, is simply a fable grounded in ignorance of non-European history. European agriculture shared most traits with other regions and was in no way uniquely advanced or peculiarly pregnant with social change.) Peasants' responses to deepening oppression and increased demand for surplus delivery included technological innovation and diffusion over vast distances, as well as long-distance migration toward peripheral regions and toward towns. As the ruling classes exhausted the potential of their own subjects to increase surplus delivery, they tried to conquer and exploit other communities of producers, to acquire external as well as internal fields of exploitation (Blaut, 1982; 1987b, chap. 7), and this led to further interconnectedness of regions. At the same time, feudal ruling class communities were united in webs of kinship, or bureaucracy, or caste, which sometimes extended over very large areas. We know that the neat parcelling of societies into nation-states did not exist in those times, that language regions were ill-defined and language barriers of little significance, even that religious differences did not set up barriers to the movement of ideas, things, and people. So we should think of most feudal societies as sharing a common space, through which social forces and pressures diffused in all directions, over great distances, easily crossing the boundaries of states. Given this conception, it is not difficult to understand why the general evolution of feudalism as a mode of production was proceeding in about the same way over much of the hemisphere.

In the late Middle Ages there were signs of profound change in many agricultural regions across the hemisphere. There were indications of two sorts: signs of decay, or even imminent collapse, in the feudal system, and signs of change toward commercialized agriculture and toward incipient rural capitalism. The mode of production appears to have been in a state of decay, and we find increasing exactions, peasant revolts, migrations to agricultural frontiers and towns, intense warfare among ruling classes for access to producer populations, and more. By the 14th century, feudalism had entered a stage of crisis — although not of collapse — in Europe, but it appears that there were similar crises in parts of Asia and probably — as we will doubtless learn from further research — Africa. (See, e.g., Chicherov, 1971; Habib, 1969; S. Gopal, 1972; Mukherjee, 1967.) In all three continents there was a movement of peasants to the towns, perhaps at roughly comparable rates. In no large region, European or non-European, could this have become a flood of rural-urban migrants, since urban population was still a small percent of total population. Still, it was an effect of crises in the rural areas. Whether these crises were indications that the mode of production was truly near collapse, and this from internal contradictions, perhaps cannot be decided as yet, but in any case feudalism in Europe was no closer to its final demise, prior to 1492, than were the feudalisms of many extra-European regions.

In all three continents we find relatively (not absolutely) small agricultural regions, generally hinterlands of protocapitalist cities, which were being penetrated by capitalism in the period just prior to 1492. Among these were Flanders, southern England, northern Italy, the Nile valley, Malabar, Coromandel, Bengal, northern Java, and south-coastal China. Land was owned by commerce-minded landlords or by urban protocapitalists (Appadorai, 1936; Elvin, 1973; Nicholas, 1967–68; Rawski, 1972; Raychaudhuri, 1962). Rents were usually paid in cash. Industrial production was spreading out into the countryside in all three continents: the early putting-out system was actually de-urbanizing industry in northwestern Europe, as the control by guilds became loosened; probably the same was occurring in parts of Asia and Africa, where merchant and artisan guilds were also well-developed and strong in the Middle Ages. (See Appadorai, 1936; Gernet, 1962; Mahalingam, 1951; Nilakanta Shastri, 1966; Tung, 1979.) Over a

much broader area, commodity production had fully penetrated the agricultural economy, and it is extremely doubtful whether West-European peasant agriculture was more highly commercialized than that of many extra-European regions. Probably we can assume that level of urbanization is a good comparative indicator of level of agricultural commercialization for this period, since it must represent the main off-farm demand for agricultural products. By this measure, Chinese and Indian agriculture would have been more highly commercialized than European.

Cities dotted the landscape from northern Europe to southern Africa to eastern Asia. Some of these cities were seats of power for major feudal societies; others were marginal to these societies, socially and geographically, and usually were to be found along sea coasts, where they had mainly an interstitial relationship to the larger feudal societies, trading goods among them and producing manufactured commodities for them. Probably it would be incorrect to speak of two distinct classes of urban place, internal and marginal; nevertheless, we can distinguish a special group of port cities which were strongly oriented toward manufacturing and trade, were more or less marginal to powerful feudal states (some were within these states, some were small city-dominated states or even city-states), and were heavily engaged in long-distance maritime trade. In these cities, the mode of production was usually a kind of primitive or incipient capitalism — certainly it was not feudalism — with wage-workers being perhaps the dominant exploited class, merchants or merchant-landlords or merchant-manufacturers the ruling class, and economic activity being a mixture of trade (movement of commodities, banking, etc.), manufacture (both large-scale and small), and commercial agriculture. Some of these mercantile-maritime cities were quite small, others quite large, but it appears that most of them were at roughly the same level of development of protocapitalist institutions, classes, and technology. This is not surprising since they were intimately connected to one another in a tight network of trade, along which ideas, techniques, goods, and people flowed in all directions, in constant criss-cross diffusion (Blaut, 1976). (Example: Malacca in the late 15th century traded with the Mediterranean, Inner Asia, East Africa, the Middle East, India, China, and probably Japan as well as all of Southeast Asia.

See Pires, 1944.) The network of mercantile-maritime centers stretched, like a string of pearls, from the Baltic to the Eastern Mediterranean, and from there southward to Sofala (or beyond — the history of East and South Africa is still buried in colonial slumber) and eastward to Indonesia and Japan. The network also extended inland in all three continents, but the mercantile-maritime cities and oceanic routes were eventually of greater evolutionary importance in the rise of capitalism than were the inland centers. This was true for (at least) two reasons. First, foreign trade was the most peripheral of protocapitalist activities; it was literally beyond the reach of the law. (Inland cities which bordered on deserts would also have had this peripheral quality.) Second, long-distance commodity movement by sea, involving as it did the transport of vital staples as well as luxuries, was, among protocapitalist activities of the late Middle Ages, perhaps the closest we get to industrial capitalism in the urban economy. It was not merely an exchange of commodities but very much a production process, involving the production of many commodities including ships, and incorporating sophisticated technology, a large workforce, complex transactions, and massive capital accumulation. (And recall that change-of-place is just as much a part of production as change-of-form; it is not at all the same thing as exchange.)

The protocapitalist port cities of Europe were not more highly developed than those of Africa and Asia in the 15th century. This holds true regardless of the kinds of criteria chosen as measures. The European cities, first, were not larger in absolute or relative population. In fact, urbanization in Europe was probably less advanced than urbanization in China, India, the Arab region, and no doubt many other non-European areas. The urban population in early Ming China was perhaps ten percent of the total population (Elvin, 1973). In the Vijayanagar Empire of southern India it must have been at least as high: the inland capital alone held about three percent of the population — comparable centers in Europe, such as Paris, may have had half that percentage — and the coastal port cities were both numerous and large (Mahalingam, 1951; Naqvi, 1968; Satish Chandra, 1964). Second, the development of the techniques of business was fully as advanced and complex among the merchants and bankers of Asia and Africa as among those of Europe (Chan-Cheung,

1967; Das Gupta, 1967; Di Meglio, 1970; Elvin, 1987; Gupta, 1970; Habib, 1964; Jha, 1963; Pires, 1944; Prakash, 1964; Purcell, 1965; Qaisar, 1974; Toyoda, 1969; Udovitch, 1974). Third, the technical-material means of production seem to have been at about the same level of development in many mercantile-maritime centers of all three continents, allowing for differences in the volume of production and trade, the kinds of merchandise, and the like. Maritime techniques were also comparable across the hemisphere: while they differed from ocean to ocean, it cannot be said that ships of one ocean were more technologically advanced than those of the others (Needham, 1965–84, vol. 4, pt 3; Lewis, 1973; Lo, 1955; Ma Huan, 1970; Purcell, 1965). Manufactures in port cities and other industrial centers were also roughly comparable in gross scale and level of development (Chaudhuri, 1974; Elvin, 1987; Gernet, 1962; S. Gopal, 1972; Jha, 1963; Naqvi, 1968; Needham, 1965–84; Qaisar, 1974; Rodinson, 1970, 1973; Wiethoff, 1963; Yang, 1970). Fourth, the urban class composition of Asian and African centers seems to have been similar to that of European centers. Finally, the old European myth, codified by Weber, that European cities were somehow more free than non-European cities which were under the tight control of the surrounding polity, is essentially an inheritance from diffusionism, which imagines that everything important in early Europe was imbued with freedom while everything important in Asia (not to mention Africa) was ground under a stultifying “Oriental despotism” until the Europeans came and brought freedom. The so-called “free cities” of central Europe were hardly the norm and were not central to the rise of capitalism. The partial autonomy of many mercantile-maritime port cities of Europe, from Italy to the North Sea, was of course a reality, and usually reflected either the dominance by the city over a relatively small polity (often a city-state), or the gradual accommodation of feudal states to their urban sectors, allowing the latter considerable autonomy for reasons of profit or power. But all of this held true also in various parts of Africa and Asia.

We have briefly reviewed most of the elements of medieval society which Marxists tend to bring into discussions about the transformation of feudalism to capitalism, and found that literally nothing that can be called criterial or crucial to the process was a European monopoly. Of course, conservatives and a few Marxists

(like Perry Anderson) turn to other elements: the European form or forms of the state, Europe's religion or religions, etc. I comment on some of the conservative theories elsewhere (Blaut, forthcoming, *a*) and it is not necessary to do so here. In the late Middle Ages, Europe, as a continent, was no more advanced than Africa and Asia.

ORIGINS OF COLONIALISM

If Europe was no more advanced than Africa and Asia in 1492, then how do we explain the fact that it was Europe, not Africa or Asia, which reached and conquered America? And how do we explain the conquest? Unless these and some related questions can be answered with non-diffusionist, non-Eurocentric arguments, we will still be stuck with the theory that Europe was unique in 1492 — if not unique in level of development, unique nonetheless in potential for development, and in this notion of “potential” lie some of the most bigoted ideas about “European Man” and “the European mind” with its supposed “rationality,” “progressiveness,” “venturesomeness,” and the like. But Europeans reached and conquered America for reasons which are very mundane and carry no implications of racial or cultural superiority.

During the 15th century Europeans sailed down the west coast of Africa, and at the end of the century crossed the Atlantic. This was a major lengthening of the radii of oceanic travel from European ports. But such lengthening of oceanic travel distances was taking place all through the hemisphere in that period. The later Middle Ages was a period during which long-distance sea trade increased greatly, and with it the technology of ocean shipping. In the 15th century Atlantic ships were not more advanced technologically than Indian Ocean and Pacific ships; there were design differences but they did not imply different evolutionary levels. In that period Africans were sailing to India, Indians to Southeast Asia, Arabs to China, Chinese to Africa, and so on. Europeans were basically excluded from this trade by the location of their ports, and it is not surprising that, when a certain level of development of protocapitalist enterprise had been reached, they would open up (with piloting and charting help from Africans and Indians) the already well-known route around Africa into the

Indian Ocean: to do this was to do what every other mercantile-maritime community was doing at that time. The Columbian voyage was one of history's greatest exploration efforts but it implied no European superiority in any regard whatever. It was one of many long-distance exploratory voyages being undertaken in that period: others included Chinese voyages to Africa and an Indian voyage c.1420 around the Cape of Good Hope which was said to have gone some 2,000 miles out into the Atlantic before, finding no land, the seamen turned back (Ma Huan, 1970; Panikkar, 1959; Blaut, 1976, note 17).

Europe had one advantage only: location, or more broadly accessibility. From the Canary Islands (Columbus' jumping-off point for the passage) the distance to America is some 3,000 miles less than it is from Sofala, the nearest (presently known) mercantile-maritime port in the Indian Ocean; the distance from China and Japan to California is greater still. The crucial matter would be to sail to a part of America with possibilities for trade and plunder; this would mean an even longer voyage from non-European ports: from Sofala to the West Indies; from China to Mexico. But simple location is only part of the story. Sailing from the Canaries to the West Indies one is wafted by the Trade Winds, and returning via a more northerly route one is pushed by the Westerlies. From the Indian Ocean, by contrast, one must sail around the Cape of Good Hope against strong prevailing winds, while the North Pacific is a zone of storminess and rather unhelpful winds. Thus: given the common technology and common motivation within the protocapitalist network in the 15th century, it is most unlikely that communities in the Indian Ocean or Pacific Ocean would have reached the Western Hemisphere at the time the Europeans did so. This argument, by the way, is not to be confused with environmental determinism. Accessibility is a fact of human existence about which there is little disagreement. (For instance, no Marxist would deny that Cuba's location close to the United States is one troublesome source of Cuba's problems.) What is being argued here is the thesis that it was vastly more probable that Europeans would make contact with America, and beyond that would enter into historically consequential interaction with America, than would Asian or African communities. (On the other hand, if we had to choose between an environmentalistic explanation and a racist one invoking Euro-

peans' innate superiority, we Marxists would unhesitatingly choose the former.)

What about North and West Africa? The Maghreb cities were in a state of decline, as Ibn Khaldun had eloquently pointed out not long before. They were shrinking as traders in the face of political and economic difficulties with the Turks, the Europeans, and others. They could not have mounted a long-distance voyaging campaign like the Iberian one. West Africa did not have major ports in that period, as far as we know, and, although much coastal sea trade took place it did not involve large ships and long distances. The reason seems to be that the massive trade from West Africa to the rest of the hemisphere was an overland trade, via the Sudanic, Saharan, and other inland routes. This was much more direct and much cheaper than movement by sea. The great cities of West Africa in this period were inland cities.

Why did the conquest succeed? The traditional answer to this question is a mythology that is diffusionist and in part racist (as when Aztecs are described as having been so superstitious that they fell down in awe of Cortés and his men, thinking them gods, etc.). There are basically two mundane reasons why the conquest succeeded rapidly. The most important one by far was the susceptibility of Americans to Eastern-Hemisphere disease. The secondary one was their strong disadvantage in military technology. Both stem from one cause that was not well understood until fairly recently. The Western Hemisphere was settled very late in human history, probably no more than 30,000 years ago. The first migrants came prior to the Eastern-Hemisphere agricultural revolution. They were hunters-gatherers-fishers-shellfishers. They, and also later migrants, came from northeastern Asia, a region too cold for agriculture then and still largely so today. Hence they had to invent agriculture for themselves in the New World. Apparently this occurred only some 7,000 years ago, perhaps 4,000 years later than the Eastern-Hemisphere agricultural revolution. Thereafter, cultural evolution in the Americas seems to have broadly followed the same pattern as in the other hemisphere, as regards matters of technology and mode of production. In 1492 the Americans had almost caught up with the people of the other hemisphere but were still well behind them in military technology. Yet technology diffuses easily, and if technology had been the desideratum, it is certain that the Americans, after

losing a few initial battles, would have borrowed their adversaries' technology and, with their numerical superiority, thrown the invaders into the sea.

This did not happen because the Americans were already dying in pandemics of Eastern-Hemisphere diseases, before the great battles were joined (Crosby, 1972). Americans were intensely vulnerable to these diseases as a result, again, of the history of settlement. There had been no biological contact between the Western- and Eastern-Hemisphere civilizations (or none that was consequential) for millenia, and immunities to Eastern-Hemisphere diseases had disappeared in American populations. Perhaps equally important, most of these diseases would not have afflicted the migrants in their home areas in Siberia, for two reasons: warm-climate diseases would have been absent there, and so too would Eastern-Hemisphere diseases which originated, or became epidemiologically significant, only after the beginnings of agriculture and urban life. Hence the devastating pandemics which began immediately after 1492 and basically accounted for the inability of American civilizations to survive in the face of the European attacks. Probably 90% of the population of central Mexico was wiped out in the 16th century, most of the deaths coming from disease and most coming early enough in the century to materially assist the conquest (Borah and Cook, 1972). Rather comparable declines occurred in other parts of the hemisphere. The Americans were not conquered: they were infected.

COLONIALISM AND THE BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION

In 1492, Europe was moving out of feudalism and toward capitalism, but at a sluggish pace. The English woolen industry was growing, not (as is often claimed) as a step toward imminent industrialization, but as a result of the decline of woollens in other parts of Europe (Miskimin, 1969). Rural growth was taking place but this reflected in part a population recovery after the great plagues and in part an ongoing and not at all sudden commercialization (Abel, 1980). Towns were growing only slowly, and urban population was still only a tiny fraction of total population (de Vries, 1984). (Some extra-European regions had larger fractions and larger cities.) In fact, there were strong indications of economic downturn rather than growth (Hodgett, 1972; Lopez

and Miskimin, 1961–62; Smith, 1969). The Italian Renaissance was neither an economic nor a technological revolution (Lopez, 1953; Thorndyke, 1943), and did not raise the Italian protocapitalist centers above the level of other centers in the hemispheric network. Nothing in the European landscape of 1492 would suggest that a revolutionary transformation was about to take place.

Just a few decades later the rate of change speeded up dramatically, and Europe clearly entered a period of rapid metamorphosis. Change continued to accelerate, and we now witness the true rise of the bourgeoisie. Non-industrial capitalist production increased rapidly in northwestern Europe, while feudal production in that region declined toward extinction. Protocapitalist centers expanded. The bourgeoisie gained power as a class and eventually pulled off its bourgeois revolution, taking full power in the Low Countries and England in the mid-17th century and coming near to that stage in a number of other countries. (I will use the date 1688, the date of England's "Glorious Revolution," as the token for the bourgeois revolution, as I am using 1492 as the token for the origin of colonialism.) Did this transformation result from internal causes within Europe? I will argue rather that external factors — broadly, colonialism — initiated the transformation, continued to feed it, and sparked those internal changes which eventually produced the revolutionary transformations in economy and society but which could not have done so without the continuing impact of colonialism throughout the period 1492–1688. In a sense, then, colonialism led to the rise of capitalism. (Or look at it this way: If Indian protocapitalist centers had been the ones to reach first, and then conquer, America, and so initiate a period of Indian colonialism, capitalism would have risen first in India. Or Songhay, China, etc.)

Colonial enterprise was from the outset a matter of capital accumulation. No matter if some elements of feudalism were incorporated in legal and land-granting systems, and if the Iberian governments took a substantial (though usually overestimated) share of the profits. No matter if the people involved in the process, in the colonial world and in Europe, played a great number of different roles, some of which defy classification as to mode of production. Questions pertaining to these matters deserve discussion among Marxists but they do not alter the empiri-

cal reality which we are discussing here. The goal of all European individuals and groups involved in the colonial process (clergy apart) was to make money. The leading group was the protocapitalist class, not only merchants but also industrialists, profit-minded landlords (titled and untitled), shipowners, carters, shopkeepers, small-scale artisan-manufacturers, and others; not only Iberian but also Italian, Flemish, Dutch, German, English, French. This class community took its profit from American (and secondarily Asian and African) enterprise and invested part of it in Europe, buying land and developing commercial agriculture, developing industries which were associated with the expanding colonial enterprise or with the economic growth within Europe which the colonial enterprise engendered. Part of the accumulated capital was ploughed back into additional colonial risk enterprise, in the Americas and in the new trading enterprises in southern Asia, Africa, and the Levant.

Colonial enterprise in the 16th century and the early 17th generated an immense amount of capital, and did so in many ways. One was gold and silver mining (and plunder). A second was plantation agriculture, principally, in that period, in Brazil. A third was the trade with Asia in spices, cloth, and the like. A fourth and by no means minor element was the profit returned to European houses from a great variety of productive and commercial enterprises in the colonial world, including profit on production for local use, on imports from Europe, on a variety of secondary exports from the Americas (leather, dyestuffs, etc.), on intercontinental trade outside of Europe (e.g., between Mexico and Peru, Mexico and the Philippines, Africa and Asia), and the like. A fifth way of accumulating was slaving. A sixth, piracy (see Dunn, 1972). And there were others. Notice that most of this is normal capital accumulation, not really that slippery thing called "primitive accumulation." Surplus value from wage labor, not to mention forced labor, was involved in all of this, and most of it was value from production, not simply from trade. Nothing could be more erroneous than to dismiss 16th-century colonial enterprise as a compound of primitive accumulation and exchange (falsely equating transportation with exchange); then to contrast this with supposedly genuine production in Europe; and then to declare it thus proven that colonial enterprise in that century had little to do with the rise of capitalism in Europe because only

production can change the mode of production. Colonialism involved massive production, massive exchange, and massive capital accumulation.

Two forms of accumulation need to be looked at in detail. One involved precious metal production in the Americas and its reverberations in and beyond Europe; the other, plantation production, mainly in Brazil. Huge amounts of gold and silver were exported from the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries, and were inserted into the circuits of an Eastern-Hemisphere market economy in which gold and silver already provided the common measure of value, directly or indirectly, in almost all markets. The flow of precious metals began immediately after 1492, and by 1640 at least 180 tons of gold and 17,000 tons of silver had reached Europe (Hamilton, 1934; Brading and Cross, 1972; Chaunu and Chaunu, 1956), although the true figure must be at least double, perhaps triple, these amounts, since records were poor for some areas and periods and since contraband was extremely important. Additional quantities of gold came from colonial activities in Africa (Magalhães-Godinho, 1969). Between 1561 and 1580, about 85% of the entire world's production of silver came from the Americas. The brute quantity of gold and silver in circulation in the Eastern-Hemisphere economy as a whole was profoundly affected: hemispheric silver stocks may have been tripled and gold stocks increased by 20% during the course of the 16th century as a result of bullion brought from America (Vives, 1969). Much of the pre-existing Eastern-Hemisphere stock must have been frozen in uses not permitting direct or indirect conversion to money, so it is conceivable that American bullion as much as doubled the *total* gold- and silver-based money supply of the Eastern Hemisphere during the 16th and early 17th centuries. (In Europe alone, the circulation of metal coins increased eight- or ten-fold in the course of the 16th century; see Vilar, 1976.) This process must be seen in geographical perspective. It was money flowing constantly and in great amounts through Europe and from Europe to Asia and Africa, constantly replenished at the entry ports with more American supplies, and constantly permitting those who held it to offer prices for goods, labor, and land which were consistently higher than the prices anyone had been able to offer in prior times. Whatever its other effects may have been, this process first and

foremost permitted the holders of this money, the protocapitalists of Europe, to out-compete everyone else inside and outside Europe.

The importance of these flows of bullion is routinely underestimated, mainly for three reasons. First, the process is dismissed as purely primitive accumulation. But the metals were mined by workers and transported by workers, and the enterprise as a whole involved risk capital and all the other traits of protocapitalism as it was practiced at that time. That it was partly state-controlled does not alter this argument; nor does the fact that some of the labor was unfree. Very major economic and social systems were built around the mines themselves in Mexico, Peru, Honduras, and other parts of the Americas. Second, the argument is dismissed as monetarism. This charge reflects a failure to see the 16th-century economy in its proper geographical context. The possession of precious metals and derived currency was highly localized in space. European protocapitalists, as a community, obtained it and set it in motion outward, toward eastern Europe, toward rural and urban sectors not fully drawn into the protocapitalist economy, and toward markets and investment opportunities outside of Europe. And the supply of bullion was essentially continuous, so that the prices which European protocapitalists could offer for commodities, labor, and land were persistently higher than those of their competitors, and remained so in spite of the catastrophic inflation which American bullion generated in many parts of the Eastern Hemisphere (for India, see Hasan, 1969; for China, see Atwell, 1982). So the European protocapitalist community steadily undermined the competition in all markets across the hemisphere, within Europe and without, eventually gaining control of most long-distance seaborne trade in most of the mercantile-maritime centers in the Indian Ocean mainly for this reason.

Third, the importance of bullion from 16th-century colonial mining is dismissed as part of the critique of Earl J. Hamilton's classic theory that the precious metal supply stimulated the rise of capitalism by (in essence) creating an imbalance between factors of production in the European economy (Hamilton, 1929). Hamilton was perhaps the first economic historian to grasp the fact that American bullion was one central, crucial cause of change in Europe, although he was (partly) wrong about the

mechanisms which brought about that change. The metals did not transform the economy in any direct sense. Rather, they gave the protocapitalist class the power to accelerate the transformation which was already underway toward bourgeois society, and prevent non-European protocapitalists from sharing in the process.

Plantation colonialism was also of crucial importance in the rise of the European bourgeoisie. Thanks to the work of C. L. R. James (1970), E. Williams (1944), and many others, this is no longer denied by Marxists but it is nonetheless underestimated, mainly for three reasons. First, we do not notice how important the plantation economy was in the period before the bourgeois revolution (c.1688), hence its significance for that bundle of events and thus for the centration of capitalism in Europe. Second, we mishandle the question of how to define unfree labor and, doing so, forget that (a), just like free labor, it leads to accumulation, (b) back in the 16th and 17th century even free labor was somewhat unfree, hardly ever encountering a free labor market, and (c) much wage labor was involved in the plantation economy. (Padgug, 1976, trips badly over this question.) Third, we fail to criticize the myths bequeathed to us by traditional Eurocentric scholarship concerning the role of sugar in Europe. Contrary to this mythology, cane sugar was not simply a rare and curious (hence unimportant) commodity in Europe, and sugar planting was not a novel enterprise, an insignificant economic curiosity quite peripheral to capitalist development. Feudal and semi-feudal sugar production was found throughout the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages (Galloway, 1977; Deerr, 1949–50; Mintz, 1985). Cane sugar was unimportant only in northern Europe, on account of its price in comparison with locally available sweeteners like honey. When the occupation of the Atlantic islands gave European protocapitalists a substantial amount of empty land with nearby cheap (slave) labor, they found that they could undersell the traditional Mediterranean producers and so make fine profits. This was one of the key discoveries in the history of capitalism, fully as important as the steam engine. During the 16th century, these producers simply *displaced* the traditional producers — the overall supply of sugar did not increase until later (Deerr, 1949–50) — and so created the first truly important protocapitalist industry.

After the plantation system had proven its profitability in the

Atlantic islands it leaped to Brazil and became even more profitable and much more important. Here, at the close of the 16th century, it was producing a profit permitting a doubling of productive capacity every two years, a profit which amounted, early in the 17th century, to £1,000,000 sterling per year. By the year 1600, the annual value of sugar exported from Brazil already amounted to £2,000,000 sterling—twice the annual value of England's *total* exports to *all* the world (see Simonsen, 1944; Minchinton, 1969; Furtado, 1963); this should be viewed against the backdrop of the traditional view that England's exports in that period, principally of wool, were paradigmatic for the “awakening” or “rise” of capitalism in Europe. (Indeed, per capita earnings from sugar in Brazil, for all except Indians, seem to have been as high as per capita earnings in Britain in the early 17th century: Edel, 1969). These and other statistics tending in the same direction suggest that in 1600 and thereafter the sugar plantation system, with its attendant economic and geographic characteristics, including the slave trade, shipping, refining, etc., was the single most important protocapitalist industry of the period.

In the 17th century the plantation system rapidly expanded, and its significance for the rise of capitalism increased considerably. During this century a total of 2,000,000 slaves was shipped to the Americas. Barbados (the first British sugar colony) began producing around 1640 and within the next 50 years about 50,000 slaves were imported into this tiny island alone. I know of no protocapitalist industry in Europe in that period which utilized more labor (both free and unfree) and generated more capital. In the case of Holland and probably also Britain, the 17th-century growth of sugar planting, and its ancillary industries like slaving, was central to the class triumph of the bourgeoisie.

But there were still other important sources of accumulation in the colonialism of the 16th and 17th centuries. Sugar was not the only plantation commodity although tobacco, dye plants, cacao, and other products were of lesser significance. Very considerable profits came from the Asian and East African trade in spices, cloth, etc. (Chaudhuri, 1985; Das Gupta, 1967; Magalhães-Godinho, 1969). These profits were not entirely in the sphere of merchant capital. Europeans were involved more or less directly in the production of spices in the Moluccas and India and in the

African slave trade; later very much so in Indian cotton production. Control of (major) sea-commerce in the Indian Ocean gave a big boost to European shipbuilding and shipping. And many thousands of European workers were employed in one or another aspect of the Eastern trading enterprise, particularly after the founding of the great East India companies around 1600. Within the sphere of colonial enterprise and the capital it generated, three additional complexes need to be emphasized, although little is known about their quantitative significance. First of all, there were many secondary, often rather humble, forms of production outside of Europe which brought commodities to Europe and accumulated capital, among them the huge fishing and whaling industry in the northwest Atlantic. Second, a very large agricultural economy existed in the Americas, supplying the mining (and secondarily planting) areas with food, fiber, leather, etc. Third, the colonial process generated a great deal of direct, not to mention indirect, economic activity in Europe itself.

Value comes from labor. In principle it is better to look at labor than at production if we are to assess the significance of early colonialism for the rise of capitalism, and Europe. In practice this is not very easy; not much is known about labor forces of the 16th century. There is also a certain skittishness in the way Marxist scholars apply (and sometimes refuse to apply) familiar categories like labor and surplus value to the extra-European world of the past (and the present). For our purposes, two comments will suffice on this matter. The first is a caution against the error of telescoping history. We have to compare the labor of 16th- and 17th-century colonial wage workers, peasants, and slaves, not with that of European workers of a later era, the industrial era, but with European workers of the *same* period, when feudal and protocapitalist relations of production held sway. Marx commented in *Capital* (1976 [1867], 861) that it would be naive "to apply the standard of the 19th century to the relations of production prevailing in the 14th century," and that caution applies no less to the 16th and 17th than to the 14th.

Second, our concern is to explain the rise of the bourgeoisie as a class in Europe. The central thread (among several) was capital accumulation and its use to further the social and political advancement of this class up to the point where it could seize power, in a bourgeois revolution. There is no disagreement over

the fact that capital was accumulated from the labor of colonial workers of all sorts, including slaves (almost all of whom were engaged in productive labor, and some in industrial labor — in mines, sugar mills, etc.), peasants engaged in forced labor (also in production), peasants delivering cash rent, or commodity rent, or labor rent to mines, urban businesses, and capital-accumulating haciendas (the idea that haciendas were sleepy, autarkic islands of feudalism is no longer popular: see for instance Van Young, 1983), and vast armies of wage-workers. So it makes sense to assess this colonial labor force as an entirety and discuss it in relation to the labor force of that period in Europe. Ideally, one should attempt to arrive at a global calculation of the amount of labor, free and unfree, that was employed in European enterprises in America, Africa, and Asia, along with the amount of labor in Europe itself (and aboard ship) which was employed in activities derived from extra-European enterprise, and then to examine these quantities in comparison to the labor market in Europe for economic activities that can be thought of as connected to the rise of capitalism. This task cannot yet be carried out because the data thus far obtained are quite sparse. So the proposition that colonial labor was central to the rise of capitalism in the period under discussion cannot really be tested as yet. Still, there are suggestive indications.

One approach to labor is through population. The population of Spain and Portugal in the mid-16th century may have been around nine million people (de Vries, 1984). There are widely differing estimates of 16th-century populations in the Americas and there is controversy about both population levels and rates of decline (Denevan, 1976). However, for our speculative and essentially methodological argument, we can ignore the controversies and use very broad estimates. The population of Mexico in the middle of the 16th century may have been around six million; this was a population undergoing continuous decline from its pre-conquest level of perhaps 30 million down to perhaps one-tenth of that figure in 1600 (Borah and Cook, 1972). Populations in the Andean regions which were involved in mineral and textile production for the Spaniards may have totalled five million in the later years of the century. We should add perhaps an additional two million for the population of other parts of Ibero-America which were within regions of European control and presumably

were involved in the European-dominated economy. Let us, then, use a global estimate of 13 million for the American population that was potentially yielding surplus value to Europeans in the mid-to-late 16th century. The population seems larger than that of Iberia. The comparison should however be made with a larger part of Europe, certainly including the Low Countries, which were deeply involved in the exploitation of America (and Asia) in this period, as well as parts of Italy and other regions.

Assume then a figure of 20 million for Europe as against 13 million for America. I doubt that the European populations were more intimately involved in the rise of capitalism than the American populations — that is, the 13 million people who we assume were in European-dominated regions, and who worked in the European-dominated economy. It is likely that the proportion of the American population which was engaged in labor for Europeans, as wage work, as forced labor including slave labor, and as the labor of farmers delivering goods as tribute or rent in kind, was as high as the proportion of Iberians engaged in labor for protocapitalist sectors of the Spanish and Portuguese economy. Moreover, the level of exploitation for Indian labor must have been much higher than that for Iberian labor because portions of the Indian labor force were worked literally to death in this period (Newsom, 1985) and so the capital generated by each worker should have been higher than that generated by a European worker in Europe. (We need to remind ourselves again that we are dealing with a pre-industrial, basically medieval economy in Europe.) We must add the fact that the capital accumulated from the labor of Americans went directly to the economic sectors in Europe which were building capitalism, whereas most workers and peasants in Europe were still connected to essentially medieval sectors of the economy. We must add also the labor of Africans and Asians. Finally, we must take into account the European workers, in Europe and elsewhere, whose labor must be considered part of the extra-European economy. By this, admittedly speculative, reasoning, free and unfree workers in the colonial and semi-colonial economies of the Tricontinent in the late 16th century probably had the potential to provide more surplus value and accumulated capital for European protocapitalism, the rising bourgeoisie, than the workers of Europe itself.

Little is known about the American workforce in the 16th

century, but speculation is again possible. Las Casas claimed that three million or more Indians had been enslaved by the Spaniards in northern Spanish America during the first half of the 16th century, and this figure, once dismissed, is now taken seriously (Semo, 1982). It is known that more than 400,000 were enslaved in Nicaragua alone (Radell, 1976). Indian slave labor was extremely important in the European economy of the Americas in that period, in Brazilian sugar planting, Mesoamerican and Antillean mining, Andean textile workshops, and elsewhere. We can speculate that 200,000 Indians were working as slaves for Spaniards in a given year in the middle of the 16th century or slightly later. Perhaps 20,000 Indians were working as free and forced labor in the mines of Mexico and the Andes in the latter part of the century (Bakewell, 1984), and it is likely that ten times that number were involved in the mining economy overall. Potosí, the great Andean silver-mining city, had a population of 120,000 in the 1570s (larger than that of Madrid, Seville, Paris, Rome). A much greater but unknown number of Indians were workers on haciendas and other European enterprises, or provided periodic forced labor, or tribute and rent in kind. (The Cortés *encomienda* in Mexico included 50,000 Indians: see Semo, 1982). There may have been 100,000 African slaves in the Americas in the closing years of the century (see Curtin, 1969; Furtado, 1963; Florescano, 1984; Inikori, 1979; McAlister, 1984). There may have been 300,000 Europeans, Mulattos, and Mestizos in the Americas in 1570 (McAlister, 1984), of whom conceivably 200,000 were workers. It seems probable that, all told, at least one million people were working in the European economy of the Western Hemisphere in the later years of the century, mostly engaged in productive labor in protocapitalist enterprises. Can this have been fewer than the protocapitalist workforce in Europe (in sectors disconnected from colonialism) of the time? But we must also add three additional quantities: labor involved in the slave trade within continental Africa (a problem that scholars are just beginning to come to grips with), labor in other extra-European regions (Calicut, etc.) which was incorporated into the European economy or produced goods for trade to Europeans, and labor of Europeans, inside and outside of Europe, which was part of the extra-European economy — sailors, soldiers, stevedores, teamsters, clerks, foremen, and the

rest. All of this demonstrates that American labor was a massive part of the total labor involved in protocapitalist enterprise in the 16th and early 17th centuries.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of the 16th century we have, in some parts of Europe as in some parts of Africa and Asia, a gradual change in society involving a decline of feudalism as a mode of production and a gradual rise of capitalism. Just what historical causes underlie this gradual transformation is not our problem in the present context. Probably the traditional Marxist formulation, the theory set out in the later chapters of volume I of *Capital* and improved thereafter by many Marxists, will prove to be basically valid if explanatory variables are defined in ways that do not exclude the forms these variables took in non-European societies. But, as I say, these questions are not our concern. The theory I am defending here merely tries to explain the centration of capitalism in Europe and the acceleration of its rise, thanks to early colonialism.

Broadly, this seems to be what happened. In 1492 the main characteristics of pre-industrial capitalism were already in place in Europe, as they were in some other areas. But this mode of production was dominant only over small sections of the European landscape, and it did not have behind it the force of state power. So it could not accumulate capital, increase production, increase the wage-work force, etc., very quickly. Colonialism removed the constraints. It provided capitalism in this region with the resources needed to increase its scale and increase its political power. Thereafter, down to 1688, a complex interplay of forces occurred, including constantly impinging effects of colonialism combined with newly accelerated changes within European society itself. There was also a spreading out of the process over the map of Europe: the initially affected areas, the protocapitalist centers (most of them maritime), and the small hinterlands around them, became (so to speak) seeds of infection, and the infection spread to interior Europe and to rural areas. The pattern of change can be seen in many processes: in urbanization, in the growth of commercial agriculture (some of it of course still under feudal control), in the great inflations, and in most di-

mensions of society from religion to architecture. But two of the processes in Europe were basic. One was the increase in the scale of capitalist production and capital accumulation. The second was the acquisition of political power by the bourgeoisie.

The political triumph of capitalism in the 17th century, in northwestern Europe, produced a qualitative change of immense significance. It provided the bourgeoisie with the legal and political and military power to rip apart the fabric of society in its quest for accumulation. Forced proletarianization thereby became feasible on a large scale, as did government support for almost any strategy which the capitalists had in mind, including intensive social investment in colonial expansion. And an industrial revolution, a transformation of the methods of production so that output could increase (and capital accumulate) at a vastly greater rate, now became possible — one might almost say inevitable. But these post-1688 processes are beside the point of the present essay. My task here has been to show how colonialism led to the centration of capitalism in Europe and the acceleration in its rise after 1492, culminating in the bourgeois revolution.

University of Illinois at Chicago

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