

## Reviews

J. M. Blaut. *The Colonizer's Model of the World*. New York: Guildford Press, 1993. Pp. vii+246. \$40.00 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

Rick Szostak  
*University of Alberta*

This is a book that I began reading with enthusiasm and finished with disappointment. The author starts with an argument about the development of Europe and its relationship with the rest of the world over the past millennia that is at odds with the traditional interpretation. Since I believe strongly that academic knowledge advances fastest when competing hypotheses are tested against each other, I welcomed the intellectual challenge. However, the author is so extreme in his interpretation of dubious evidence and so condescending toward the accomplishments of previous scholars that I soon lost confidence in his argument.

I should have been suspicious when the author began by suggesting that the overwhelming view of Western social scientists is that European civilization has been and will continue to be superior to other civilizations, due to some combination of race, culture, or environment; thus culture always is (and should be) diffused outward from Europe to the rest of the world. Such a conjecture must come as a surprise to generations of cultural anthropologists who have argued quite the opposite, as well as to any scholar who has recognized the important contributions of the rest of the world. This exaggeration is a shame, for the author soon moves on to a more tenable hypothesis: that Europe was not significantly more advanced than other world civilizations before Columbus and that it was only its proximity to the wealth of the New World that propelled it to world leadership.

The author does make a compelling case that it has served the interests of Europeans—especially elites therein—to believe that Europe's success was internally generated. In the age of colonialism this was especially the case, and the process was aided by belief in a Christian God who would naturally have smiled on his people. Today, it may allow some people to feel less guilt about trade barriers and limited aid

Permission to reprint a book review printed in this section may be obtained only from the author.

flows that might hinder the development of the poorest countries. But this is not necessarily the case. Racial arguments are rarely heard any more, and it is hard to see why attribution of Europe's success to some internal environmental factor is philosophically inferior to the claim that Europe was lucky to be close to North America. As long as we recognize that we are dealing with a complex historical process—and thus with hindsight must consider certain events or characteristics fortuitous—we cannot blithely claim that the less fortunate deserve their fate (even if we wished to penalize people for the decisions of their ancestors).

Still, it is important to recognize the potential biases that may affect our research. As Blaut notes, it is commonplace to seek to explain the beliefs of non-European civilizations with reference to non-logical arguments; we should be willing to shine the same analytic light on ourselves. The suggestion that it may well be convenient for scholars of European descent to believe that Europe's success was internally generated does not, however, necessarily imply that this was not the case.

The author tries to show that Europe was no more advanced than other civilizations in 1492, that it was merely luck that allowed its conquest of the New World, and that this conquest had a dramatic impact on the course of European economic history. The third argument is the most important, but it receives only a fifth the space devoted to the first. Since, as Blaut himself argues, the New World becomes part of European civilization after the conquest, it would seem the incentive for scholars—especially those based in the New World—to downplay the role of the New World in the rise of Europe should have been muted at least. Yet Blaut tries in less than 30 pages to demolish the accepted wisdom that the effect was marginal. There are too many points at which his argument is weak. I will choose only one. If New World bullion was so wonderful, then why did not Spain lead the rise of Europe? If we recognize that most of Europe got its bullion indirectly through trade with Spain and, further, that most of this bullion was soon traded away to Asia, does this not cause a little skepticism that this was the sole cause of the rise of Europe?

Scholars are far from a consensus as to which factors were of greatest importance in the rise of Europe. Thus, a reasoned argument in favor of a "new" hypothesis need not invoke scholarly fury, as Blaut seems to expect (nay, encourage). It is his determination to show at any cost that only the New World mattered, which may annoy. Why must the course of world history be as unidimensional as Blaut suggests? Pointing out the flaws in competing hypotheses is an important scholarly chore, and Blaut deserves credit for the attempt, but he can scarcely expect to win converts by arguing that all other hypotheses must be wrong.

Even if Blaut were right about the role of the New World, I would suggest we would still find that Europe in 1500 was different in many ways from Asian and African civilizations (and they from each other). Scholars could then debate how important these differences were. But this is not for Blaut. He argues that there is, in fact, no significant difference, at least on average, between temperate and tropical soils. There is no difference in the level of technology between major civilizations in 1500. There is no difference in the frequency of natural disasters, marriage ages, or birth rates either. The only differences Blaut recognizes are those too obvious to ignore. Climates do vary, but alas this has no effect on the potential for civilization (we are enjoined to pay heed only to the work of geographers on this point). Other civilizations were characterized by greater political centralization, but this makes no difference. One curious difference does survive. Blaut applauds those authors who chronicle the process of economic transformation in the non-European world in the centuries immediately before 1492, but ridicules any suggestion of dynamism in the European economy at that time. Blaut has read widely, and as one who pursues the big picture he should not be expected to tie up every loose end. But he cannot expect to convince others when his analysis seems driven by the conclusion he wishes to reach.

Why was Europe able to conquer the New World? The author at times seems to suggest that New World civilizations were as advanced as Europe was, but elsewhere he notes that migration from the fringes of Asian civilization tens of thousands of years ago followed by dispersal over a huge landmass may have left the New World a couple of centuries behind (nowhere are we treated to a discussion of the logic behind the central assertion that civilizations must all develop at the same speed, even when there is little or no contact between them). Still, for Blaut this potential superiority in technology cannot be the reason for European success in the New World; rather it is the fact that Europeans bring with them a host of old world diseases, which had developed after the departure of the Indians for the New World. He may be right to emphasize the key role of disease in the conquest, but the reader is unlikely to be persuaded by the argument Blaut uses to get there. (As for the argument that Europe obtained rich colonies only because of their geographic proximity, should we not at least be exposed to some analysis of why Asian civilizations did not make greater use of, or indeed know much about, nearby resource-rich scarcely populated parts of the world circa 1500: Siberia, Australia, Central Asia?)

The same sentiment can be applied to the whole book: just because it is badly argued does not mean the argument need be wrong. The economic historians I know would love to see more research on the economic history of the non-European world. If Blaut's book en-

courages this, we will be better for it. And we may well find that other civilizations were not as "backward" in many ways as has been thought. However, I would urge those scholars to approach these issues with an open mind, and let the data decide the issue. It is not enough to find a couple of guns or mills or printing presses in China and, thus, assert there is no technological difference; we need to know about relative quality and quantity. Whatever we find will increase our understanding of the process of economic development, and accurate knowledge of this process can only improve our support of the development process.

Readers of this journal may be especially interested in the fact that Blaut briefly carries his argument forward to the present. He asserts that it is nonsense to suspect that European industrialization will be diffused to the rest of the world. Non-European states that have industrialized have done so for internal reasons; the prospects for the rest in a Europe-dominated world are poor. But do not worry too much: Blaut also suggests that physicists are likely wrong about the Big Bang Theory—he feels that all things good must start in more than one place.

Benjamin Higgins. *All the Difference: A Development Economist's Quest*. Montreal and Buffalo, N.Y.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992. Pp. xiii + 283.

Walter C. Neale  
*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

*All the Difference* is an intellectual autobiography. The focus is Higgins's many missions to LDCs over 40 years, and then the lessons that he has learned from these experiences. It is a tale of many roles, many ideas, and changing judgments.

Beginning with his education (1929–40) at Western Ontario, London School of Economics, University of Minnesota, and Harvard, the story continues with his wartime service with the United States Housing Administration, the Federal Works Agency, and the War Production Board, on to the Bronfman Chair at McGill and the Ritchie Chair at Melbourne and his experience in shaping the Liberal Party program for Australia's elections in 1949. Then, in 1951, came the mission to Libya. "And so," he says, "by a series of accidents, I became a development economist" (p. 27). This is the first of several erroneous statements (others are equally harmless); by page 27 any reader knows that the man had already involved himself in so many activities that his own request to work in a capital-scarce country was no accident. Even one who has been interested in Higgins's career is amazed at