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BOOK REVIEW

Jason C Sharman

Empires of the Weak:

The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order

(Princeton University Press, 2019, 216 Pages, \$26)

This colourful work enjoys tackling the general acceptance of the "military revolution" and "fiscal-military" theses that claim European expansion over the 16th-19th century world came from military superiority derived from other countries' slowness in picking up the latest military technology and strategy. The book lays out its thesis and then focuses on its historical application in greater detail in three different periods and different parts of the international system. It examines the Iberian conquest of the Americas, laying its success to the disease that accompanied conquistadores and cultural acceptance of their invasion. It then analyses the European incursions into Asia, conducted by commercial companies rather than states, sophisticated meeting responses attempted militarily and relying instead on negotiations. It then examines the reverse conquest of the Ottomans, who ruled a larger empire than Europe. The work then draws its conclusions, rich with hindsight.

The author points out, at every occasion that he can, that the world of the times was dominated by huge, contiguous states in Asia who allowed European nibbling around the shores because they gave little value to the one European military (and commercial) advantage, the maritime fleet. The tactics and fortifications growing out of the European

internecine wars before and after 1648 were not used or useful in the colonial conquests, and in any case were already adopted by the Asian empires. But even through the 19th century colonial establishment, Europeans bargained rather than conquered territory for settler colonization. What then does explain the European colonial conquests and the rise of the modern state? Maybe "simply a coincidence" (126) or "largely shaped by cultural considerations" (148) with culture defined as just about everything (24).

The problem with unhorsing a reigning theory is that one has to supply a new one for the match to continue., A Syrian philosopher Al-Kawakibi has said, "Never overthrow a tyrant without having a replacement in reserve " and the same thing goes for intellectual authorities.. Removing a reigning explanation opens us to a myriad contenders, and Sharman decries the search for causal theories in general, which leaves us alone with idiosyncrasies, the bane of philosophers, Perhaps the most interesting effort at replacement is the European emphasis on negotiation, bargaining, intrigue, and deal making with lesser powers and states as an alternative to conquest. This was made possible by frequent disinterest of larger states and empire about the maritime field and their coastal fringes, and their positive

interest in the trade opportunities that entrepot ports provided. The Ming, Qing, Mughal and Ottoman empires held off European settler colonization until the later nineteenth century, and beyond for China.

But the new thesis is arresting. International Relations are indeed taught Eurocentrically and World History as well. The existence of a tripolar international system of Mughal (and then Ottoman), Ming and Holy Roman Empires, with the third leg of the tripod the wobbliest, well before the first so-called World War, is a more accurate and more encompassing presentation of a global politics. The fact that colonization, in Asia more than in Africa or America, was carried out by national corporations (not multinational yet) only in the name of their home state throws the debate about international vs interstate politics into historical relief. The book draws on many scattered historical references large and small, and emphasizes the early development of non-Western military practices. In brief, the study tries to put Occidentalism in a global and historical perspective.

One problem that dogs attempts to theorize with a historical sweep is when to stop. Studies of European expansion tend to draw their pictures of the process with a final focus on the 18th century through World War II. But Sharman calls in his bets at the present day, concluding with "Losing in the End: Decolonization and Insurgency from 1945, the coup the grace on study of European expansion; it's a bit like saying the Roman Empire was a failure because of its ultimate decline and fall. The study decries looking at past events from a contemporary mid-century perspective but then uses a nearly centurylater perspective as its vantage point (130). It makes its point, however, about the "military revolution" claims for colonization and "fiscal-military" thesis of war making states and does it repeatedly and persuasively. It needs to call up an alternative.

The work is intellectually challenging and makes observers think about where they stand before they call in their bets on the sweep of history. It also makes us realize that the world has been round for a long time. It has been explicitly written for a general readership (the introduction makes an emphasized point of it) and people who are willing to challenge their views (and the author's) should relish the book.

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