

J.C. Sharman, *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xii + 196 pp. Hardcover, \$27.95.

Within a brisk volume spanning three chapters and 151 pages, international relations specialist J.C. Sharman sets out to dismantle one of the more persistent interpretations explaining the emergence of Western European global hegemony. His target is the notion that European powers prevailed through a set of military and technological advantages derived from the unique circumstances of their own embattled, fractured, and violent continent. The so-called military revolution hypothesis has done much to explain how relatively small European forces seemed to enjoy unprecedented success in a period of global expansion lasting from the late fifteenth through the late eighteenth centuries. Yet, as its title suggests, *Empires of the Weak* argues otherwise. “Expansion,” Sharman argues, “was as much a story of European deference and subordination as one of domination” (p. 2).

Sharman begins by carefully defining the hypothesis, drawing on such seminal essays in the field as Michael Roberts’ “The Military Revolution, 1560–1660,” and Charles Tilly’s “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” along with Geoffrey Parker’s 1996 monograph, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*. He then offers a point-by-point refutation of both its premises and implications, utilizing newer literature on the history of encounters in Mexico, Peru, South and Southeast Asia, North Africa, and even within continental Europe. The examples are meant to demonstrate the ways in which Europeans were unable to utilize tactics from battlefields back home, how in many cases Europeans were outnumbered, outgunned, and outmaneuvered by their opponents overseas, and how the diffusion of tactics and technology not only flowed in multiple directions and from multiple sources, but also proved at times less advantageous than commonly believed. At the same time, Sharman

challenges related hypotheses of the role of European states in military and commercial conquest through a close examination of private entities such as the Dutch and English East India Companies, and by showing how competing powers, notably the Ottoman Empire, exhibited far more innovative and versatile military and organizational strategies.

The result, Sharman reveals, was not a “functionalist” process of conquest defined by “premised on rational learning and Darwinian survival pressures” (p. 134); rather it was a set of developments that grew incrementally from *ad hoc* strategies, due deference to local authorities, opportunistic and sometimes mistaken alliances among regional rivals (including of other European powers), and plenty of setbacks and outright defeats. Sharman is clear that ocean-going vessels and new fortification designs were critical technologies, but these served at least as often to keep Europeans at arm’s length from regional powers as to project force from afar. Above all, what conditioned the responses that Europeans and non-Europeans were not the dictates of function and strategy, but the lenses through which each viewed the habits and actions of the other. “These approaches,” he concludes, “owed as much to cultural inclinations as technology, tactics, or fiscal-military institutions” (p. 122).

Ultimately, of course, a handful of European states did preside over immensely powerful empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But that fact can be misleading when examining the early history of European expansion. Sharman is careful to draw a line between the imperialist activities of European powers before and after the nineteenth century. As he explains, “The advances of the Industrial Revolution marked a basic change in the relations between Europe and other civilizations, which is in part why the dynamics of the preceding early modern period were so distinct” (p. 133). He argues that approaching the questions in this way is necessary in order to avoid projecting later successes onto past encounters, and to preclude an

overemphasis on the European perspective, which he sums up as “biases of time” and “biases of place” (p. 123). This is a sound point of consideration, but it unfortunately leads Sharman to omit some discussion of the ways in which earlier encounters with non-European cultures informed the trajectory of Europe’s later commercial and industrial revolutions. Such considerations have featured in such recent histories as Nicholas Dirks’ *Scandal of Empire* and Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton*, and they might have strengthened his case by injecting a clearer sense of diachronic flow to his analysis. To his credit, however, Sharman does circle back at the end to consider the final decline of European empires in the second half of the twentieth century, and he deftly shows how the process of decolonization proves his point. He writes, “The wars of decolonization, and subsequent Western counterinsurgency campaigns, decisively undermine the easy assumption that victory goes to those with most advanced technology, the largest economies, and the most developed state apparatus” (p. 144).

The relatively scant attention paid to change over time and engagement with primary research may irk some historians seeking in Sharman’s book new narrative signposts for imperial history. In this regard, the book’s subtitle, *The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order*, overpromises somewhat, since Sharman is not really telling a story as much as proffering a new analysis. But the book nonetheless succeeds with an appreciation for historical specificity that will please most historians, just the right measure of theoretical clarity to be accessible to graduate and advanced undergraduate readers, and enough well-placed historical anecdotes to make for an engaging read. Global studies scholars will find the book interesting primarily as a well-crafted synthesis that mobilizes the growing historical literature on encounters between European and non-European polities in the Early Modern period. It is certainly worth a look, first because it considers newer discoveries from historians of

the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Near East, and second because it uses its foundational questions to explore the thornier connections among the work of historians and other social sciences. Military historians and historians of empire may wish to continue quibbling over the minutiae of Sharman's examples, but that should not detract from the volume's central contribution, which is to force us back to the drawing board to rethink some of the most fundamental questions in the field, and to adopt more nuanced answers with a fresh awareness of the contingencies of time, place, and culture, and with more consideration of the experiences and perspectives of all sides involved in these transformative encounters.

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