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BOOK REVIEWS

SHARMAN, J.C. *Empires of the Weak. The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2019. xii, 196 pp. \$27.95; £22.00.

Jason Sharman has written an interesting and thought-provoking narrative, aiming “to correct the Eurocentrism that has so often biased earlier studies” and bringing “into question conventional cause-and-effect stories about war-making and state-making” (p. 2). He synthesizes and reinterprets a significant quantity of recent works on the reasons behind the rise of the West and the military history of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, notably between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Although his account is polemical and repetitive at times, he succeeds in presenting a succinct outline and comprehensible exposition of the underlying arguments at stake.

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, *Empires of the Weak* is divided into three major chapters. Sharman touches upon the Spanish and Portuguese expansion in the “New World” and Africa, examines Asian powers such as the Ottoman, Mughal, Ming, and Qing empires, and explores Dutch and English activities, conflicts, battles, wars, and conquests in Asia. In the following, I will mostly spotlight Sharman’s overall theoretical and methodological framework, as well as some of his arguments related to European intrusions in Asia.

Reminiscent of related analyses put forth by the late André Gunder Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz, John Hobson, and others, Sharman argues that Europe did not have a military edge over Asia (and Africa) until the Industrial Revolution and that “[w]hen there were gaps, these were usually closed quickly” (p. 35). His explanations are a welcome corrective to teleological Eurocentric master narratives claiming that the military *great divergence* between East and West was already visible between the fifteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. Sharman’s synthesis is a reminder that, in many respects, European powers did not possess military and technological advantages vis-à-vis the Asian “gunpowder empires” (Hodgson) until the nineteenth century. In effect, the Chinese and Ottomans pioneered several technologies and practices that were to become building blocks of Europe’s fifteenth- to eighteenth-century military revolution. At that time, Europe’s military developments hardly represented the only possible trajectory towards the establishment of powerful centralized and bureaucratic states and territorial expansion through conquest. Furthermore, Sharman underscores that, by and large, prior to the nineteenth century, Europeans had to pay deference to Asian powers and build alliances with local elites before being permitted to establish trading posts. When fighting against Asian, African, and Native American polities, European logistics, organization, diplomacy, planning, discipline, strategic mobility, and disease (in the case of the Amerindians) “were at least as important as superior weapons for victory” (pp. 133, 140). Furthermore, Sharman contends that “often non-Western opponents have improved their performance by adopting a very different style of [defensive] war. Success has often been a product of tactical and institutional differentiation” rather than blind emulation (p. 134). He provides some concrete examples to show that: “Those outside Europe who practiced irregular tactics were more likely to cause persistent problems for the European invaders. In contrast, non-Western powers who sought to emulate Western methods often actually made themselves more vulnerable to European conquest.” (p. 140)

Sharman does not portray “a world of surprising resemblances” (Pomeranz). He sets great store by cultural differences, for example, when it comes to depicting the European East India Companies’ dominance over the seas vs. Asian and African proclivities towards and dominance over land. Drawing on the writings of Jeremy Black and Wayne Lee, Sharman criticizes mechanistic “paradigm-diffusion” approaches. He rightly argues that history does not always unfold according to the challenge-and-response logic, while cultural peculiarities help to explain why there is no automatic endeavour towards increased military efficiency and knowledge transfer. Nonetheless, Sharman seems to adhere to a rather essentialist understanding of cultural dispositions as neither socioeconomic dynamics, nor the reasons behind cultural norms and behaviours loom large in his account. He prioritizes contingent at the expense of causal explanations and hardly considers that cultural preferences have their own histories and are often intimately related to more or less rational deliberations as well as clear-cut socioeconomic interests and problems. In other words, cultural, geopolitical, and socioeconomic dynamics constantly influence, reinforce, and depend on each other. For example, in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and especially eighteenth-century South and West Asia, innovations in the military domain were increasingly dependent on outside expertise since there were no military schools, academies, colleges, universities, naval officers’ schools, or artillery schools.

Sharman convincingly argues that the periodization of the “military revolution” thesis, proposed by Michael Roberts (1955), Geoffrey Parker (1988), and Philip Hoffman (2015), needs to be reassessed, especially with regard to European expansion in Asia and Africa. He underscores that the thesis does not provide the fundamental elements to understanding the ways in which Europeans fought, won, or lost wars in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, most notably between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. As Sharman points out: “The volley fire by massed musketeers protected by pikemen that came to dominate warfare in Western and Central Europe was almost never used elsewhere. Instead of the massive armies states deployed in Europe, expansion in the wider world was propelled by tiny expeditionary forces.” (pp. 4–5)

But Sharman’s almost complete denial of structural European advantages is out of place as it depreciates important differences in institutional and fiscal coordination and organization, especially regarding the implications of European joint-stock companies, central banks, the national debt, and statecraft in general and their specific interconnections with military developments in particular. In his zeal to disarm the military revolution thesis, he slides into an either–or logic, skimming over some of the more momentous effects of Europe’s military revolution and, thus, misrepresenting historical realities. In this spirit, Sharman argues that even where Europeans held technological advantages “(e.g., cannon-armed sailing ships), this did not alter the strategic balance” (p. 132). By contrast, in some important instances, Western Europe’s financial and naval lead was indeed significant. Take, for example, the case of the Third and Fourth Anglo-Mysore Wars in the late eighteenth century. In the wake of the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the establishment of an extractive fiscal-military state in Bengal – resulting from the conjuncture of Mughal decline, superior British gunfire, strategic aptitude, bribery, and plenty of credit from wealthy Indian bankers – in the 1790s, the British East India Company (EIC) had more revenue at its disposal than any other Indian power. Moreover, despite Haidar ‘Ali and Tipu Sultan’s attempts to build a powerful blue-water navy, the maritime pre-eminence of the EIC and the Royal Navy – besides fiscal, diplomatic, logistic, and other significant advantages – was a key factor in bringing about the British annexation of Mysore.¹

1. Kaveh Yazdani, *India, Modernity, and the Great Divergence: Mysore and Gujarat (17th to 19th C.)* (Leiden [etc.], 2017), pp. 227–230, 256–272.

Indeed, in his eagerness to debunk Eurocentric myths and prejudices, Sharman's storyline somewhat overshoots the mark. This is already foreshadowed on the first page, where he states that "when it comes to transformations of international politics, perhaps it would be true to say that nothing interesting has happened in Europe for at least the last 500 years, perhaps even since the fall of the Roman Empire" (p. ix). One wonders why Sharman ignores the cataclysmic consequences of major historical watersheds such as the Renaissance, Enlightenment, bourgeois revolutions like the English "Glorious" Revolution and the French Revolution, the Scientific and Industrial revolutions, the path-dependent effects of colonial plantation economies in the Caribbean, the exploitation of millions of enslaved Africans, and the gradual subjugation of the entire Indian subcontinent. He also overstates his point when denying any links between continuous warfare and the emergence of modern European states or when asking "to dispense with the implausible and unrealistic assumptions about learning as a route to effectiveness and rational reform via deliberate policy interventions" (p. 149). He does so emphatically, by invoking that "early modern actors in all regions tended to explain success and failure by divine providence and supernatural interventions" (p. 25). However, superstition, irrational beliefs, transfer of know-how, and rational calculation are not mutually exclusive. Especially during the transition period of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, there were several rulers, thinkers, and institutions in advanced parts of Afro-Eurasia that simultaneously combined these contradictory views and practices. More significantly, a substantial number of historical examples of that period could be cited to demonstrate that competition as well as the diffusion and adoption of superior technologies have often prompted efficiency and effectiveness.

Sharman is of the opinion that in the period 1500–1750 European conquests were less significant than those of the Asian empires in terms of economic resources captured. This is dubious given that the unequalled amount of bullion plundered in the Americas allowed Europeans to buy Asian goods and commodities as well as African captives in the first place. Sharman even claims that Europe's global supremacy between c. 1850 and 1914 was exceptional, i.e. "unrepresentative", "a poor guide" (p. 133), and rather insignificant against the backdrop of the last 500 years as,

Europeans didn't win in the end: their empires fell, and their military capacity shriveled. Even the United States has experienced more defeats than victories against non-Western forces over the last half-century [...] European powers won most of the battles while losing most of the wars, a pattern that recurred in the US counterinsurgency wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This brings into question the importance of technology, and the presumption that military adaptation leads to more homogeneous organizations, rather than more differentiated ones, as part of the now familiar idea of asymmetrical warfare. (p. 7)

Moreover, he joins the choir of those who argue that colonial empires were unprofitable. But the latter contention is much more controversial than Sharman suggests. Utsa Patnaik's recalculations of the "drain of wealth", for example, show that the rate of transfer from Asia and the West Indies as a percentage of Britain's GDP doubled from 3 to 6 per cent between 1770 and 1801, remained 6 per cent in 1811, and slightly dropped to 5.3 per cent in 1821. She adds that the transfer relative to Britain's gross domestic capital formation from domestic

savings accounted for 62.2 per cent in 1770, 86.4 per cent in 1801, 85.9 per cent in 1811, and 65.9 per cent in 1821.²

Sharman's line of argumentation glosses over the fact that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, matters of war and peace are generally subject to sociopolitical decision-making processes and do not necessarily reflect military capabilities as such – an argument that Sharman is well aware of, but dismisses. Indeed, no power in world history has ever possessed the unprecedented military resources of the US army that is capable of erasing any nation from the surface of the earth within a few seconds. Furthermore, to argue that “Europeans didn't win in the end” ignores the fact that imperialism during the second half of the twentieth and in the twenty-first centuries does not necessarily need to invade other countries in order to benefit from unequal exchange and the super-exploitation of the Third World's labour force; the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx) does its bit to tighten the grip of imperialism. Of course, the violent neo-colonial subjugation of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Mali are important exceptions to the rule. But even those invasions illustrate that the US and its European allies would hardly have been able to conquer West Asian and North African territories without undisputed military superiority. It is, furthermore, no coincidence that the West has succeeded in pursuing its socio-economic and geostrategic interests in these regions despite recurrent military and political setbacks.

In summary, the aforementioned flaws notwithstanding, *Empires of the Weak* is a valuable addition to the underrepresented topic of non-Western military history as part of the growing literature on the underlying causes of the *great divergence* from the vantage point of global military and political history.

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GITTLITZ, A.M. *I Want to Believe. Posadism, UFOs, and Apocalypse Communism.* Pluto Press, London 2020. xi, 249 pp. Ill. £75.00. (Paper: £17.99; E-book: £9.99.)

Born in 1912 in a proletarian neighbourhood of Buenos Aires as the son of Italian immigrants, Homero Cristalli was not so different from many other children of working-class families in early twentieth-century Argentina. He went on, however, to live a quite extraordinary life, which included playing football in the country's first division, participating in massive strikes as a trade union organizer, setting up the first Latin American sections of

2. Utsa Patnaik, “The Free Lunch: Transfers from the Tropical Colonies and their Role in Capital Formation in Britain during the Industrial Revolution”, in K.S. Jomo (ed.), *Globalization under Hegemony: The Changing World Economy* (New Delhi, 2006), pp. 30–70, 49–50, 58.