



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

J.C. Sharman

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How the rise of the West was a temporary exception to the predominant world order

What accounts for the rise of the state, the creation of the first global system, and the dominance of the West? The conventional answer asserts that superior technology, tactics, and institutions forged by Darwinian military competition gave Europeans a decisive advantage in war over other civilizations from 1500 onward. In contrast, *Empires of the Weak* argues that Europeans actually had no general military superiority in the early modern era. J. C. Sharman shows instead that European expansion from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries is better explained by deference to strong Asian and African polities, disease in the Americas, and maritime supremacy earned by default because local land-oriented polities were largely indifferent to war and trade at sea.

Europeans were overawed by the mighty Eastern empires of the day, which pioneered key military innovations and were the greatest early modern conquerors. Against the view that the Europeans won for all time, Sharman contends that the imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a relatively transient and anomalous development in world politics that concluded with Western losses in various insurgencies. If the twenty-first century is to be dominated by non-Western powers like China, this represents a return to the norm for the modern era.

Bringing a revisionist perspective to the idea that Europe ruled the world due to military dominance, *Empires of the Weak* demonstrates that the rise of the West was an exception in the prevailing world order.

Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order Details

Date : Published February 5th 2019 by Princeton University Press

ISBN : 9780691182797

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Format : Hardcover 216 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Politics

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From Reader Review Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order for online ebook

Nikolaj Andersen says

This was a great and enlightening read!

Sharman argues that the conventional thinking about European history since 1500 (and per extension, global history), relying on the so-called "Military Revolution thesis" is fundamentally flawed and has left historians and social scientists with a Eurocentric and misguided view of both past and present.

My three main takeaways were:

1. The history of the expansion of the international system since 1500 (or 1492) is not a story of European expansion through superior arms and societal structures over the weaker societies of the Americas, Africa and Asia. Rather, the Europeans were usually only able to set up trading ports at the mercy of local empires and repeatedly had their ass handed to them when engaging in military confrontations. Further, the tools one might identify with European modernity (namely guns and large, professional, state-run armies) were either already present in Asia or not decisive at all.
2. There is a strong tendency to read history very selectively, focusing on the rise of European empires (namely the British) and the Fall of non-European empires (such as the Ottoman and the Chinese). Yet, little attention is paid to the quick dismantling of the European empires in the 20th century or to the massive successes of non-European empires. The Ottoman empire is particularly noteworthy in this regard, repeatedly defeating European armies over multiple centuries, but often just considered "the sick man of Europe" or a disaster waiting to happen. In short, the criteria by which we evaluate empires vary greatly across cases.
3. Based on the Military Revolution Thesis, we often assume states to consistently move toward optimizing its own behavior when it comes to warfare, incorporating new technologies, strategies and even societal structures to support these. Yet, the evidence for this story is highly mixed. Often states hold on to counter-productive strategies in the face of repeated failure or even switch from a successful strategy to a less useful and more costly one. Sharman argues that we cannot assume states (or any other human organization) to always move toward optimization. Instead, we must take factors such as culture and prestige into account. What's cool and prestigious might not be profitable in neither short nor long run.

One of the great things about the book is that it is an argument about eurocentrism that does not rely on argues about representation. Often the criticism of eurocentric thinking is that it fails to represent other points of view, the underlying value being academic plurality and inclusion. Sharmen demonstrates how a eurocentric and biased approach to history (and international relations) leave us with ideas that are simply wrong. The Europeans did not go from glory to glory since the 1500s. More often, they met stronger societies and had to submit.