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Book Reviews

J. C. Sharman. *Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019

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Introduction

Warfare had undergone many revolutionary changes over the centuries. Hittite chariots, for example, are said to have spread east and south bolstering aristocracies at the dawn of urbanization some three thousand years ago. Then, the quality of swords and armouries infinitely improved, as the infantry steadily took centre stage, and the Iron Age swept across Eurasia and, later on, Africa. The Chinese invented the crossbow as early as the 7th Century BCE, and Hannibal surprised the Romans with elephants few centuries later.

Presaging modern conscription, the Greek city states lined up citizen hoplites in impervious phalanxes during the Classical era, while the Caliphs later relied on slave-soldiers in no small measure. The Romans are credited, in turn, with elaborate fortifications and catapults, and these later trans-morphed into the famous *trace italienne*. Early Christianity is credited with the doctrine of just war (*jus bellum justum*), and Confucianism with war aversion.

The Mongols famously used gunpowder, and the technology gradually spread from the East Asia through the Islamic World to Europe. More importantly, they demonstrated the importance of mounted archery skills. In the end, it was ironically gunpowder weapons that would eradicate the danger to sedentary societies from nomads like the Mongols themselves. What is more, the Mongols did not just impart knowledge but learnt in fact a good deal from European siege methodology.²

On the high seas, the Byzantines famously employed oil explosives (“Greek fire”). The Ottomans employed fast oared ships, and the Portuguese sailed fast ocean-going carracks in the 1400s. Yet, at much the same time, the famous Zheng He fleet possessed much bigger ocean-going ships, which was loaded with thousands of Chinese marines, among other cargo. The seas were getting more crowded, but blue-water warfare was rare until the 1600s.

¹ This book review by Niv Horesh is entitled *Warfare and Modernity in World History: Re-examination*

² Peter Frankopan (2015), *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (Bloomsbury), p. 160.

True, by uniquely mounting cannons on ships the Portuguese were able to gain a toehold in far-flung corners of the planet. Recall the compass here: it was needed to get to those corners but had actually been a Chinese invention. Peter Lorge therefore concludes that early-modern warfare was actually a Chinese invention even if European armies markedly grew in size in that era. To be sure, China developed a centralised taxation system with which to fund its large standing army earlier. Recall here, too, that the Chinese had actually invented gunpowder to begin with.

Clearly, innovation was not just Western but a two-way street throughout history. Yet, Parker famously postulated in the 1990s that European warfare had been from the outset distinct: it was technologically superior and expensive. So it was requiring a larger tax revenue than elsewhere. The nub of the argument on European distinction defaults to the consistent improvement of muskets and cannons, although Michael Roberts had earlier in the 1950s also stressed innovative tactics. And more recently, Jeremy Black also called attention to European cartography and intelligence gathering as superior.

In sum, Roberts showed that the distinction between Europe and “the rest” started showing up in the 1500s with the advent of gunpowder technology, mercantilism and high taxation. And as Charles Tilly would later famously conclude his study of early-modern Europe, ‘wars made states and states made war’.

Nevertheless, since the 2000s, a growing chorus of scholars have cast doubts on the extent to which European polities can be seen to be distinct. At first, the research onus was on comparative standards of living, where early modern China was seen to be just as affluent as Europe, according to Kenneth Pomeranz for example. From another perspective, Robert Markley ably showed the misgivings that some early modern European writers had about the status of Europe against that of the giant land empires of Asia.

Lately, attention has shifted to warfare whereby scholars like Tonio Andrade have admirably detailed the tenuousness of European presence in East Asia in the 1600s. Yet even Andrade concedes that by the early 1800s, China had fallen so far behind the West in gunpowder technology that it was easily defeated by Britain in the Opium War. True, as Kaushik Roy suggests, the technological gap may have been smaller in India, and gunpowder weapons may have not mattered on the battlefield there as much to begin with. But India was considerably colonised, and closer to Europe than China.

Situating the Book Under Review

Herein Jason Sharman intervenes with a beautifully written and cogently argued book exhorting us against reading too much 1800s history into the 1600s-1700s. For Sharman gets to grips with his subject matter with both historical and social-science acumen.

Echoing Pomeranz, Sharman posits that Europeans had no technological or institutional advantage over Asian land empires before the Industrial Revolution even if Asian polities were less interested in naval expansion. In other words, frequent wars in Europe did not necessarily entail improved performance on the battleground elsewhere.

Barry Buzan and Richard Little would no doubt agree with Sharman that the Westphalian system in Europe, created as it was as a result of the traumatic Thirty Years War, is largely irrelevant to other parts of the world in terms of theory. That war and modernity are conceptually so intertwined does call for a larger case-study palette. However, as will soon become apparent, the emergence of the “national debt” economy in Europe, which later spread around the world, undergirding an expansion of armies, is one key dimension of the story largely absent in the book.

Sharman may also needlessly overstate the case against Eurocentrism when he writes right at the outset that nothing interesting happened in Europe since Roman times. So does his claim that, Atlantic slavery notwithstanding, Europeans and African rulers were on equal terms in the 1500s (p. 49).

More to the point, Sharman also seems to be overstating the case when arguing that the styles of warfare used by Europeans overseas were vastly different than at home, hence whatever military revolution occurred in Europe could not matter that much elsewhere (p. 4). To the contrary, one would be rather surprised to see Europeans using the same methods everywhere given that they were vastly outnumbered in Asia until the 19th Century, as he himself concedes. As late as 1740 there were, for example, only 2,000 troops employed by the East India Company (*hereafter* EIC, p. 87, p. 90).

Political correctness aside, is it not impressive that an organization like the EIC could later occupy so much of India relying in no small measure on local *sepoys*? My own research on British banking in Asia has led me to similar conclusions: Europe came to dominate much of Asia relying in no small measure on Asian capital and Asian human resources. The secret to power was thus as much institutional as technological. Ann Carlos and Stephen Nicholas’ study is apposite here but it is not cited.

In Latin America, Europeans faced much lighter resistance, and Jared Diamond most evocatively tells how epidemics had wiped out the Incas and Aztecs even before they rose in arms. Vastly outnumbered, Diamond attributes the Conquistadors’ astonishing triumph to the possession of guns and, to a lesser extent, horses. Recall, too, that no civilization in the Americas used metal weapons. Sharman therefore infers that metal swords and local allies mattered much more to the Spaniards than guns, drawing on the very same Diamond (p. 5). In that sense, he is turning the Cortez and Pizarro occupation stories on their respective heads.

The shock-and-awe impact that Conquistador guns created cannot be erased from the equation, precisely because – as Sharman notes – the Spaniards were so vastly outnumbered (p. 39).

Anyone reading Diamond would agree that hand-to-hand fighting mattered too, and here Spanish metal swords were infinitely better than obsidian or stone weapons used by the locals. Spanish armoury was better than the cotton padding used by the locals. The same applies once again to horses and pack animals, which the locals did not have (outside llamas). But is all of that enough to disqualify the shock-and-awe effect? Sharman resolutely cites John Guilmartin here to suggest the Spanish would have won anyway even without gunpowder weapons (p. 41)!

The Muslim and Russian ‘Counterpoints’

Sharman rightly reminds us that the Ottomans were fairly adept at using gunpowder weapons until the 1700s, and that this factor partly explains their success versus the Mamluks and Safavids (p. 107). As Gábor Ágoston has shown, the Ottomans did indeed *not* just import guns and cannons from Europe but also manufactured some themselves. In the 16th century Ottoman mills could manufacture up to 1,000 metric tons of gunpowder. By the end of the 18th Century imports made for the great bulk of ordnance, however.³

Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) famously modernised Russia’s industry and army. He newly mobilised peasants, and had experts brought from Western Europe with a view toward acquiring the nous of manufacturing armaments independently. In 1705, the English ambassador to Russia, Charles Whitworth, praised the quality of Russian ammunition, and the country remained largely self-sufficient in that regard until the 1850s.⁴

The point, then, is that Western European military superiority over the Ottomans cannot be established before 1750; neither perhaps can superiority be established over the Russians before the Crimean War (p. 111-113). Modern arms cost states a lot. In essence, Sharman asks how could Russian self-sufficiency be reconciled with its refractory tax system and prevalence of serfdom? This is a thought-provoking question but it remains the case that neither the Ottomans nor the Russians became ocean-going powers, dominating global trade flows. Since the taxation of overseas trade was at the heart of state formation in early-modern Europe, much fiscal revenue was therefore lost.

³ Gábor Ágoston (2005), *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press), p. 199, p. 160.

⁴ Walter M. Pinter (1984), “The Burden of Defense in Imperial Russia, 1725-1914”. *Russian Review* 43.3, pp. 231-259.

Sharman draws on Giancarlo Casale to highlight, by way of contrast, the Ottoman “powerful” navy, sailing as it did from Ethiopia right through to Sumatra; and the Ottoman “central” taxation system (p. 100-101). Yet, as even Casale concedes, Ottoman naval prowess waned as early as 1600. For its part, far from being centralised, the Ottoman fiscal system increasingly relied on tax farming in the early modern era, as Sevket Pamuk shows.

Recall here, too, that the Ottomans did not play any role whatsoever in stemming 1700s Dutch encroachment into Java or even Aceh, where devout Muslims ruled. Ottoman gunpowder technology may have spread in India earlier but that may not be the case for Southeast Asia. Drawing on Sun Laichen, Sharman argues that much of mainland Southeast Asia had adopted gunpowder weapons presumably from China well before the Ottomans and Portuguese arrived.

To be sure, Pamuk’s work is cited in the book, but somehow interpretations lead in different directions. For revisionists, the Ottoman Siege of Vienna in 1683 is, despite ultimate Ottoman defeat, a demonstration of their *singular* military and fiscal prowess, right at the heart of Europe. But conservative accounts point to the fact that Catholic-Protestant tensions at the time meant the Holy Roman Empire had been subverted by other European powers, and in that sense the Ottomans had been greatly assisted.

My own work highlights banks note issuance as a form of state debt that had been invented in Song China but re-emerged in Sweden in the 17th century, that is to say well before the Industrial Revolution. From then on, bank note issuance diffused quickly across Northwestern Europe but reached Istanbul only in 1840. In stark contrast to Western Europe, the US and Japan – less than 7 % of the Ottoman money supply was made up by bank notes as late as 1914. Clearly, in relative terms, the Ottoman financial system was lagging behind – this is not a 19th Century story read backwards. As already mentioned, the story has a fiscal dimension too which, according to the Parker narrative, translates into military shortfall.

If disease helped Europeans in the Americas, it held them back until the “New Imperialism” of the 1800s in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, in the tropics, horses and pack animals were of less use (pp. 35-36). Sharman is absolutely correct in drawing our attention to the late colonization of Africa, a continent that was after all on Europe’s doorstep.

Curiously, African gold and slave markets were approached by sea. Overland, Europeans would have had to traverse the Maghreb but there was vehement Muslim resistance there that made the idea impossible. After all, Portugal itself was partly occupied by Muslims until the 1400s.

When the Portuguese did forcefully try to invade the Maghreb like in the Battle of Alcazarquivir of 1578, they were resoundingly defeated amid heavy artillery from both sides. What is more, the Portuguese King Sebastian was killed in battle; the Spaniards would invade Portugal, and the Ottomans would increasingly be involved in the Maghreb thereafter (p. 48, p. 114).

At this juncture, Sharman insightfully points to Oman as another very important spoiler of European expansion. In 1661 Omani naval forces aided by local collaborators wrested Mombasa from the Portuguese, and would later take over Zanzibar too. In 1668, Omanis sacked the Portuguese fort as far away as Diu (p. 54, p. 58).

In sum, Sharman shows there was a lot of gunpowder in use in North Africa. The traditional narrative foregrounds, for example, Mamluk (and Japanese) reluctance to embrace firearms, and in that sense Sharman provides a powerful corrective. He even suggests Mamluk-made guns reached Western India in 1500 (p. 74). But, notably, Peter Mundy who visited India in the 1630s, did not describe in his famous travelogue any guns used by Mughal soldiers.

India and China Revisited: the Religious Card

Religion played its part not just in Vienna. Sharman rightly mentions the Ottomans were tolerant of religious minorities, and in that sense they presaged perhaps social modernity. He also insightfully shows how the Portuguese conspired from the 1500s with Hindu principalities against Muslim attacks, as was the case in Goa in 1510. Ottoman contact with, on the other hand, the Muslim principalities in Sumatra come across as rather feeble (p. 58).

For revisionists, ‘Vienna on sea’ is the 1509 Battle of Diu in modern Gujarat. There, 1,500 Portuguese faced an “unlikely” but large fighting coalition of sea-seasoned Mamluks, Ottomans and even Catholic Venetians, as well as local Indians (p. 57-58). But the nub of the matter is that the Portuguese actually won, thus entrenching their partial domination of the spice trade. And yet Sharman stresses what he sees as subsequent Ottoman inroads into the spice trade, and domination of the Red Sea. Frankopan suggest he may be right as, shorn of some revenue, the Portuguese turned their attention also to cotton and silk import.⁵

If Diu was a triumph, the Portuguese lost their grip on the all-important entrepot of Hormuz in 1622 (p. 83). Here, the usurper was the Protestant English with Safavid assistance, which brings to mind Rhoads Murphey’s famous argument about the English singular ability to entice the right Asian rulers to their side at the right time.

⁵ Peter Frankopan (2015), *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (Bloomsbury), pp. 231-2.

In keeping with this argument, the French support for the Mughals against the EIC during the famous 1757 Battle of Plassey came to nothing.

Sharman claims that the Ming navy drowned interloping Portuguese ships between 1521-22 (pp. 129-130). But the picture is more complicated. Actually, by 1557 the Portuguese were able to establish a permanent settlement in Macau through kickback to local officials and, importantly, by demonstrating their vitality to the Ming as counter-piracy agents and as cannon makers. Macao's survival in the face of local and intra-European (mainly Dutch) pressures is a testament to the ingenuity of the Portuguese sea empire. On the other hand, the Ming were defeated by the Qing even though the latter had fewer cannons, thus reinforcing Sharman's point about the irrelevance of European technology on the Asia battle field.

It's the Economics

Pooling private capital through enhanced property rights was key to European ascendancy in the early modern era. In that sense, joint-stock trading companies like the EIC, or its Dutch competitor the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*), were great innovations. Yet, strangely, Sharman seems to read weakness into the EIC and VOC precisely because of their joint-stock nature as compared with the more statist but less dynamic colonization effort by the Portuguese (*Estado do India*) and the French (*Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes Orientales*). That is to say, statism strangely equates with modernity in Sharma's narrative but not necessarily with military strength or profitability for that matter (p. 69).

Actually, as Sharman himself shows (p. 53), all European 'India' companies enjoyed official backing to one degree or another, including the Spanish *Casa de Contratación*. All enticed private capital to one degree or another, in return for limited trading rights. And even though Sharman sweepingly deprecates the profitability of those companies, they delivered massive revenue to their governments. The Habsburgs otherwise creamed off much of the silver bonanza discretely scooped up by *encomiendas* across Latin America by way of financing war against the Protestant Dutch (p. 66).

On its part, the VOC is said to have seen sharp decline in profits over the course of the 18th Century due to rising military and administrative costs (p.80). Yet, it is implicitly accepted that the VOC successfully drew much tax revenue from peasants deep into Java, not just from trade. After the Battle of Plassey, one can point to similar tax-farming success by the EIC in India (pp. 91-92) but the quantitative data are sorely lacking in both cases. Certainly, in their *The First Modern Economy*, Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude give a very different impression about VOC and EIC profitability compared with Sharman.

Profits sometimes tell only part of the story anyway. The EIC and VOC apparatus in the region helped convey the best of Asian technology to European master artisans. Thus, both Delft and Stoke-on-Trent boasted a sophisticated china industry in the early 17th century. Lord Macartney was famously rebuffed by the Qianlong Emperor in 1793 because China was supposedly self-sufficient, and did not need British mechanical clockwork. The British were portrayed in turn as slavishly reliant on quintessentially Chinese imports like tea, silk and ceramics. What historians rarely appreciate is that Macartney also brought along British-made ceramics to impress the locals. In other words, Europeans in the early modern age copied technology faster than the other way around even at a time when they were not sufficiently militarily strong to open the region for trade.

The VOC and EIC adapted to local taxation norms, but paid their governments handsomely for the chartered trading privileges they received. As argued above, Europe came to dominate much of Asia relying in no small measure on Asian capital and Asian human resources. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the EIC borrowed heavily from local creditors so as to finance its military build-up in keeping with European norms. Indeed, EIC's debt-to-revenue ratio rose from 120 % in 1793 to over 300 % in 1809! (p. 94) This is a marker of modernity not of weakness, as all European governments trod a similar fiscal path of "national debt", and the EIC was after all a state within a state

More generally, after 1500, commercial rather than land taxes gradually became the main source of revenue for European governments. Income tax did not become a significant contributor until the 20th Century, while customs and duties made for the lion share beforehand. It is no accident that Europeans set their eyes on the Ottoman and Qing customs service later in the 19th Century.

In that sense, none of the land empires surveyed by Sharman passes muster. Of course there were differences among them: Russia had a strong feudal aristocracy, whilst slave-soldiers were rife in the Islamic world. But apart from China, where the tax burden was light and the levy system centralised, all those empires relied to one degree or another on tax farming with high intermediary costs. As Gennaioli and Voth observe, increasingly heavy tax loads underpin economic modernity. For commercial tax receipts to grow commerce had to grow, so EIC and VOC importance also hinges on custom payments, not just charter fees.

The costs of waging war so far away from the metropole were surely prohibitive. Here, Patrick O'Brien comes to mind with his famous conclusions that 'empire' did not pay off to the British although his focus was the 19th Century. In fact, drawing on Lorge, Sharman rightly contends exorbitant outlays were the reason why the Ming gave up on naval expansion in the 15th Century (p. 133-138).

But the wider implication that the various East India companies set up by European powers were loss making is wanting at best. As argued above, these companies' operation yielded many largely positive externalities from a metropolitan perspective.

Concluding Remarks

The persistent rise of China and "all the rest" in the 21st Century re-positions the conventional story of European exceptionalism. It calls for reassessment of what some may see as a short moment in history, disconfirming hackneyed scripts of modernisations. Indeed, why should we assume frequent warfare is a desirable setting to begin with, where China and India offer alternative pre-modern 'modernities'. As we saw above, even with the best of weapons, Europeans did not always win on the battle front. And Sharman might even add that non-Western powers who sought to emulate Western warfare sometimes made themselves more vulnerable.

Vastly inferior in technological terms, Vietnam was able to defeat the mighty US in the 20th Century. In that sense, Sharman's caution about the suitability of technology to local conditions seems justified. So, too, is his emphasis on learning being a two-way street. Yet, the scholarly conversation on the so-called Military Revolution must entail a fiscal dimension and robust quantitative analysis. The emergence of the "national debt" economy in Europe, which later spread around the world, undergirding an expansion of armies, is key to the story.

The Westphalian system in Europe is largely irrelevant to other parts of the world in terms of theory because it emerged from an intense distinct warfare setting. Sharman is right, then, to call for more non-Western historical case studies to enrich our understanding of international relations. He powerfully observes (pp. 150-1):

A more cosmopolitan, less ethnocentric perspective, giving due weight to regions beyond Europe, shows Western dominance of the international system as relatively fleeting, and thus makes it much less surprising if this dominance is now being challenged with the rise of powers beyond the West.

The book makes good on its promise by delivering precisely that perspective. In passing, it also unpacks many historical conjunctures that have been scarcely discussed thus far, like the role religion played in early-modern empire building. What emerges is exceedingly cogent story, but one that often relies on narrow perusal of the pertinent secondary sources. If Sharman's attention to the Maghreb as a 'counterfactual' is enlightening, his reconstruction of the Diamond story on the other end of the spectrum is troubling. In between, lie for the most part the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal and Ming-Qing China. All willingly used guns: China invented gunpowder to begin with, and the Ottomans copiously manufactured gunpowder weapons. Yet, by 1700 all those empires heavily relied on Western munitions expertise. The rest is open to debate.