

**Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order.** By *J. C. Sharman*.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. 216. \$27.95 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

In a sprightly and concise work, J. C. Sharman brings together in 151 pages of generously printed text an account of world history over the last half-millennium focusing on warfare and international relations. Challenging what is presented as a standard Eurocentric account of world history, Sharman refutes the “military revolution” account of the rise of the global military power of European powers and argues that this has led to a relative neglect of the continued strength of Asian powers in the period 1500–1750. In particular, he correctly claims that there is a highly misleading tendency to read the outcomes of the nineteenth century back into the earlier period.

This work would have been excitingly revisionist had it appeared at the start of the 1990s, but now it is almost predictable for a specialist to read given how much that is described as provocative by the back-cover blurb writers is already very familiar in the literature. Yet, those writers are essentially social scientists, and much that may appear self-evident or well established in military history is not so in the social sciences or to general readers, and it is for the latter two audiences that the author is mainly and successfully writing. Indeed, this book has considerable value in disseminating clearly the arguments about the early modern European “military revolution,” underlining the flawed nature of the thesis, and linking this account to a convincing presentation of European imperial power as syncretic. The dependence of Europeans on others, albeit in very different contexts, emerges as central in the discussion of the period 1500–1800. Indeed, as Sharman notes, the slave trade confirms this picture, an insight that deserves more attention given the contemporary and later significance of this wrenching and miserable power relationship.

For the nineteenth century, Sharman emphasizes the military decline of China and the Ottomans in terms of deep underlying domestic political and fiscal factors rather than any technological triumphalism of Western militarism, and, in accordance with other scholars, he argues that nonmilitary technology, politics, and logistics were more important in the nineteenth century than more advanced weapons. Sharman also integrates this with his perceptive argument that care should be taken before adopting survival-of-the-fittest interpretations of international security competition, interpretations that have often been employed in a somewhat glib fashion.

Sharman brings in the fall of European empires in the twentieth century by suggesting that the role of the declining legitimacy of empires reinforces his earlier conclusion about the importance of culture and ideas as distinct from the rational pursuit of power and wealth in the making and remaking of the international system. He also claims that the abilities of non-Western insurgency forces support skepticism about the role of military technology. In practice, the latter could be complicated, from the empirical (as in the tactical value of anti-aircraft missiles in Angola and Afghanistan), to the methodological (as in the key role of other great powers in supplying insurgent forces), to the conceptual (as in the fact that we tend not to focus on insurgencies that failed). Indeed, despite his readiness to emphasize complexity and diversity, Sharman’s clarity (like that of all of us probably when writing on a broad range) regarding his building blocks does not always lend itself to the equivocation of evidence, and none of these qualifications are offered.

More interesting is the discussion of Eurocentricism in analysis, and the arguments that the world might return to the situation around 1700 in terms of a multipolar global international order. As far as the first is concerned, I am less pessimistic given the strength of world historical studies, notably, but not only, in the United States. I suspect that the

Eurocentricism in question is more a matter of the past than of the present-day direction of international relations accounts, and that Sharman's very book is a demonstration of this point. So is his discussion of what he presents as the somewhat poor relations between historians and social scientists, although, being a skeptic, I might suggest that neither should be reified as is the case here. A crude analysis would be to present Sharman as simplifying historical scholarship for the benefit of social scientists, but the disciplinary reality is one of a long cross-fertilization in ideas and work, with major American social science scholars bringing much to the table, for example, on the causes of war—academics such as Jack Levy, William Thompson, and John Vasquez. Sharman writes that “historians and social scientists often don't think much of each other's work” (16), but the evidence offered is paltry and his own valuable engagement and impressive work refutes this notion. In addition, it is possibly not terribly helpful to make comments about the character of scholarship in history and in the social sciences when the data set, as it were, is very much that of the Anglophone literature, and indeed, and understandably so, only a portion of that. Ironically, this can lead to the very Eurocentricism that is decried. More interestingly, Sharman urges more skepticism concerning what he refers to as common social science assumptions, concepts, and methods of designing explanations, and he does so with economy and skill.

As far as the return to a multipolar global international order in which Asian states play a major role is concerned, the context will of course be very different to 1700, but, again, caveats can be offered from the empirical—for example, India, as the core element of Britain's Asian empire, was a major part of that order until 1947—to the conceptual in terms of the changing nature of power, not least with reference to less disparate fiscal and information systems that are aligned on the global level by commercial links. Part of the value of Sharman's book, essentially a very interesting essay, is that it directs attention to the subject. He and all of us though have much to read if we wish to stay up to date with recent literature in the field: the “war machine” is certainly active in this respect.

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**The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World.** Edited by *Willibald Steinmetz*. New German Historical Perspectives. Edited by *Paul Betts*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019. Pp. viii+346. \$135.00.

While medieval and early modern thinkers rejected comparison as disruptive to hierarchies, and postcolonial critics disparage the practice for casting non-Western societies in a negative light, “comparisons have been, and still are, a major driving force that has contributed to the dynamism of modern European history and contemporary world society” (5), writes Willibald Steinmetz in the introduction to this insightful and informative book. The main approach of the volume's dozen (mostly German) authors is historical, though several draw upon methods and questions of economics, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines. In fact, Emile Durkheim is quoted as arguing that “comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself” (326n5).

The first three chapters analyze comparison as an object of study and a method of interpretation. Michael Eggert explains that the primary analytical tool in the European Middle Ages was analogy, which emphasizes similarity. Beginning with Descartes, by contrast, many European thinkers viewed comparison, which focuses on difference, as a more reliable means of acquiring knowledge. For example, Linnaeus organized his system of