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Philip T. Hoffman, *Why Did Europe Conquer the World?* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015. 288 pp. Maps, tables, figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-6911-3970-8; \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-6911-7584-3; \$19.95 (eb). ISBN 978-1-4008-6584-0.

Review by Elizabeth Heath, Baruch College-City University of New York.

“Why were the Europeans the ones who ended up subjugating the world? Why not the Chinese, Japanese, Ottomans from the Middle East or South Asians? All at one time or another could boast of powerful civilizations...they all had access early on to the same weapons the Europeans used. And if you go back into the past, they would all seem to be stronger candidates than the Europeans. So why didn’t they end up in control?” (p. 3). These fundamental questions animate Philip Hoffman’s *Why Did Europe Conquer World?*

In the first pages, Hoffman quickly dismisses what he deems the “standard” answers: disease and gunpowder technology. Each, he argues, insufficiently accounts for European conquest of the globe. Instead, Hoffman argues that it was Western Europe’s distinctive political history that unleashed a European tournament, a culture of continuous warfare that advanced innovations in gunpowder technology while preventing any single power from claiming dominance within Europe. This culture of war and technological innovation, according to Hoffman, eventually fueled private expeditions that enabled European powers to conquer the globe.

To understand why medieval and early-modern Europeans engaged in constant military skirmishes and technological innovation, Hoffman turns to a model of the tournament: “To understand what impelled rulers in early modern Europe to shell out so much money for war,” he writes, “we need a model, the sort of model that economists use. The right model should explain not just why Europeans fought and spent so much but why in the long run they pushed the gunpowder technology further than anyone else. It should, in short, let us do something that is sorely lacking in much global history--make a general argument that holds in more than one time or place” (p. 21). Drawing upon economic literature on conflict and tournament, Hoffman develops a general theory of the tournament in chapter two. He posits that warfare is likely when rulers view the benefits (or “the prize”) to be gained from war as relatively high in relation to the costs, in this case the cost of setting up a fiscal and military system and mobilizing men and supplies. In addition, the political costs of war (and of potential defeat) must also be low. Europe, Hoffman argues, satisfied all these conditions, leading to a political culture of warfare that spurred constant innovation. The tournament model also enables

Hoffman to explain in chapter three why China, Japan, India, Russia and the Ottoman Empire each, at different times, lost the animus required for continual technological innovation. Their lag became Western Europe's technological lead, which subsequently made it easier for Europeans "to specialize in extortion rather than peaceful trade" (p. 103).

In chapter four, Hoffman shifts attention to the dynamics within medieval Europe that promoted perennial warfare, thereby preventing the formation of a regional hegemon. Geography and kinship ties are not, he argues, sufficient explanations. Instead, Hoffman attributes the fundamental cause to "political history," the particular chain of past events that, he argues, "determine future outcomes or set a society on a path that reinforces itself over time" (p. 120). Political traditions stemming from Roman times, Hoffman contends, provided the foundation for a European culture in which rulers and elites attached high value to victory in war while experiencing low costs of mobilizing resources. Continual warfare led to forms of cultural evolution and political learning that drove imitation, technological innovation, and reinforced, rather than discouraged, ever-escalating warfare. Western Christianity (and particularly the papacy's desire to thwart the reconstitution of Charlemagne's empire) further contributed to fragmentation. In China, Japan, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and eighteenth-century India, in contrast, political history inclined rulers towards unification, enabling the emergence of regional hegemons.

Europe's tournament culture, Hoffman ultimately argues, laid the foundation for European conquest of the globe. Seeking to reduce the public costs of frequent warfare, European rulers increasingly relied on private militaries to achieve state goals. There existed, as a result, a substantial population of individuals trained in the latest innovations in gunpowder technology and eager to engage in state-supported private ventures of trade, conquest, and privateering that would accrue personal reward. These "private entrepreneurs" became the foot soldiers of European overseas conquest and control. As Europeans extended the tournament overseas, they paved the way for more permanent settlements and colonies. European encouragement of private initiative and exploration, Hoffman claims, diverged significantly from Eurasian state policies that created obstacles rather than opportunities for private initiative and expansion.

In his final full chapter, Hoffman skips forward to the post-1815 nineteenth century when, he argues, incessant warfare finally came to a halt as different incentives and risks inclined European leaders towards diplomatic and peaceful settlements rather than warfare. Nevertheless, military technology continued to evolve as Europeans realized that innovations could result from research and development off the field. The results, Hoffman argues, were continued advances in gunpowder technology in a period of relative peace—at least in Europe. Elsewhere, Europeans used this technological edge (and also medical advancements) to conquer lands in Africa, Australia, and Asia.

Hoffman concludes briefly with the decline of Western Europe and European empires and the rise of a new global tournament: the Cold War. The heyday of European dominance over the globe had ended. In retrospect, he asks, did Europeans profit from their conquest of the world? Did conquest help to generate economic growth that fueled the Industrial Revolution, especially in Britain? Hoffman is clear in his conclusion: no. The same institutions that enabled Britain to engage in low-cost warfare, he argues, also provided the foundation for British economic growth. "Political history," he concludes, "is then one of the ultimate causes behind both the European conquest of the world and the 'great divergence'" (p. 213).

Historians trained in the new imperial history or who have read much of the recent literature on “the great divergence” are likely to find Hoffman’s account of Europe’s global ascent problematic in myriad ways. Above all, Hoffman assumes a certain inevitability in global conquest and colonization (and even the trans-Atlantic slave trade and European industrialization) that stands in stark contrast to more nuanced accounts of divergence offered by historians like Pomerantz.<sup>[1]</sup> Nevertheless, Hoffman’s work also offers an opportunity to consider the challenges of using contemporary economic modeling and game theory to craft historical accounts of complex events such as the rise of Europe as a global power. These are methodological and theoretical issues that will need to be addressed should historians of empire seek greater dialogue with economic historians writing on empire, globalization, and industrialization.

Above all, economic models based on game theory frequently assume that human beings are Smithian creatures, that is, rational actors who consistently make choices according to costs and benefit analysis (often thought of in economic terms), especially when confronting conditions of competition, adversity, and scarcity. These claims assume much about the continuity of human nature, including highly individualized conceptions of the self, across space and time. Hoffman does argue that culture informs the choices made by historical actors, but his definition of culture as a system of “beliefs and preferences that people acquire not by genetic evolution but by imitating what is common or successful or avoiding what is frowned upon” (p. 121), is likewise drawn from classical liberal economics and historically specific. Moreover, it is a conception of culture best suited to moments of structural reproduction rather than transformation. As such, Hoffman’s account confronts the fundamental problem of structuralists everywhere: how to account for change over time.<sup>[2]</sup>

One suspects that Hoffman realized these limits of the tournament model and for these reasons jumped over long periods of time critical to understanding the unfolding of European colonial rule across large swathes of the globe, including the reasons why “extortion-based” trade turned into territorial conquest. An enormous field of scholarship has considered how global trade and colonization transformed Europe, including European political culture, in ways great and small in recent years.<sup>[3]</sup> This literature could provide some insight into the transformations that occurred in European political culture between 1512 and 1815 that Hoffman merely summarizes in a few sentences as part of the “political learning shaped by many forces including international relations and domestic political economy” accommodated by his model (p. 153). This is not to mention a rich and vibrant scholarship that has long explored how European trade, exploration, conquest, and colonization were shaped on the ground by the actions of indigenous populations and local conditions in ways that go far beyond simplistic explanations of disease and technological inferiority.<sup>[4]</sup>

In these and many other ways, I think, Hoffman’s model fails both to persuade and to achieve his stated aim of creating a general argument capable of explaining “why Europe conquered the world.” Still, Hoffman’s work is well-written, clearly argued, and exemplary of a particular interdisciplinary approach of economic and political history that is engaged too little by cultural and social historians. For this reason, students of empire should read Hoffman’s work as part of a much larger exploration of the new economic history and interdisciplinary approaches to empire.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, Kenneth Pomerantz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[2] On this conundrum see, among others: Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Social Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98.1 (1992): 1-29; and William H. Sewell, Jr., "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25.6 (1996): 841-881.

[3] An extensive scholarship explores how global trade and colonization transformed early-modern Europe, particularly Britain, and contributed to the rise of industrialization and the development of modern capitalism. For the British case (which Hoffman returns to at the end of his study) see, among many others: Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1961]); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Woodruff Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002); P.J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: 1688-2000* (New York: Longman, 2002); Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy, 1660-1700* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Catherine Hall, et al, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[4] Scholarship associated with the new imperial history is voluminous and includes pioneering works such as: Nicolas Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Gyan Prakash, ed., *Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For exemplary recent scholarship on the French empire that also provides a useful counterpoint to Hoffman's analysis of European military strength and imperial conquest see: Benjamin Bower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Mary Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Christian Ayne Crouch, *Nobility Lost: French and Canadian Martial Cultures, Indians, and the End of New France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014). Also Martin Thomas, ed., *The French Colonial Mind, Vol. 2: Violence, Military Encounters and Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

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