

## Book Review

*Power over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present.* By Daniel A. Headrick. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. Photographs, Illustrations, Maps, Figures, Notes, Index, pp. x+400. \$35.00 cloth.

Headrick, in *Power over Peoples*, aims to broaden the conclusions of his earlier book, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (1981); namely, that imperialists in exerting their will over weaker societies must not only have “motives and opportunities but also means” (p. 2). The means: technological innovation. He previously explained the New Imperialism’s success—that dramatic expansion of European empires from the mid-nineteenth century to World War II—as largely explained by the technologies of enhanced firearms, steam engines and medical advances. Headrick now considers whether or not such technology factors sufficiently explain other conquests of the past.

Headrick organizes *Power Over Peoples* into nine chapters, with a helpful introduction and all-too-brief conclusion (there are also individual chapter conclusions). He includes helpful notes, but unfortunately no bibliography. He divides the book into chronological time periods, starting with ocean voyages of the Old Empires and ending with twenty-first century imperialism. This structure supports his goal of analyzing the “role of technology in the global expansion of Western societies from the fifteenth century to the present.” (p. 6) The first three chapters chronicle the breakout of Christian Europe from the geographical containment of hostile Muslim states (through the discovery of the oceans, the Portuguese operating in the Indian and the Spanish establishing an Atlantic empire in the Americas). Chapter 4 focuses on Asia and Africa, with Chapters 5-7 exploring the tools of the Industrial Revolution in promoting the New Imperialism, expanding the scope of the earlier work to embrace the Americas. The final two chapters explore aviation: Chapter 8 considers aerial power’s success prior to World War II while Chapter 9 brings the monograph to the present, exposing air limitations as indigenous peoples frustrated French, Soviet and American imperial projects.

Headrick is careful to define terms in his arguments. Imperialism, he asserts, occurs when a stronger state imposes its will on a weaker society by force, or the threat of force. Technology is simply how humans exploit energy and materials for their own uses, i.e., the manipulation of nature. Superior technology has resulted in the belief of moral, physical or intellectual superiority over non-

white peoples by Westerners, with the power disparities alone often sufficient to provide motives for imperialist actions. Headrick argues that times of Western expansion correlate with technological creativity, that indeed the competitive, capitalistic nature of the West fosters technological innovation and imperialism.

There are two factors, in Headrick's view, limiting technologically-driven imperialism. Environment—the context in which imperialism operates—greatly influences outcomes, for example disease aiding the Spanish in conquering the Americas, but providing a barrier to the British in Africa (until the advent of anti-malarial prophylaxis). Headrick disagrees with Jared Diamond and others that geography determines history; even so, he would agree that the environment can challenge imperialist ambitions. The resistance of people to imperialism is Headrick's second limiting factor. Some societies submit to imperialism, others like the Japanese successfully emulate new foreign technologies (though Egypt failed in such efforts), and yet others employ indigenous strategies to successfully resist conquest.

Headrick's final argument relates to the paradox of imperialists continuing to pursue new technologies when targeted peoples successfully resist efforts to subjugate them. Situating this notion in the context of aerial bombing, he cites Mao Zedong's 1938 writings on asymmetrical warfare: The future chairman declared weapons are not everything, but it is people who are decisive, that the contest is also "of human power and morale." (p. 364)

*Power over Peoples* does not present any significant new insights; indeed, Headrick primarily employs (an impressive set of) secondary sources to support his points. Even so, the work is a valuable synthesis of the literature on imperialism and technology. This is an excellent textbook or general reference. Headrick has succeeded in his goal to create "a technological, environmental and political history of Western imperialism in the last six hundred years." (p. 6)

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