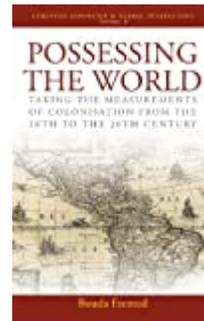




Bouda Etemad. *Possessing the World: Taking the Measurement of Colonisation from the 18th to the 20th Century.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. x + 252 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-338-1.



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Counting Colonialism

Ernest Labrousse, the originator of the quantitative history known as “Cliometrics,” reputedly declared that “to be an historian, one ought to know how to count.” Bouda Etemad, professor of history at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne, is clearly a scholar steeped in Labrousse’s statistical methodology, for he deploys it in an attempt to explain the construction and collapse of European overseas colonial empires between the mid-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The focus of Etemad’s study is on neither the causes nor the consequences of colonialism, but on the factor he believes most current scholars neglect because it seems so self-evident, namely, the technological superiority in weaponry, medicine, transportation, and communications that made European expansion in the age of the Industrial Revolution inevitable. For Etemad, the crucial question is *when* this self-evident superiority came into effect. In the first five chapters, he argues that until the Scramble for Africa in the 1880s, these new technologies had not developed sufficiently in such areas of conquest as South Asia and North Africa to give Europeans any decisive edge over their adversaries. In particular, colonizers remained extremely vulnerable to trop-

ical disease. Etemad shows that it was the widespread and effective recruitment of native soldiers that allowed Europeans successfully to shift the human cost of empire to indigenous populations.

In the spirit of Labrousse and the Annales School of historians with whom he collaborated, Etemad devotes the second half of the book to historical demography. Through the construction of a large statistical database showing the enormous geographic extent of colonies between 1760 and 1938 and the minute number of the European colonizers living there, he demonstrates the extreme and continuing numerical inferiority of the colonists to their Asian, West Indian, and African subjects, and their absolute reliance on indigenous intermediaries to uphold their rule. This proves to Etemad that modern colonization was never more than “an extremely fragile edifice from start to finish,” and explains why decolonization after the Second World War was so rapid and inevitable (p. 6). To underline this demographic determinism, Etemad draws a statistical comparison between this data and that of colonies of settlement. The latter, with their overwhelming settler majorities over

aboriginal inhabitants, followed a very different trajectory from imperial possessions that were administered but not settled.

Etemad's conclusions will hardly come as a surprising revelation for scholars steeped in the history of imperialism in the modern period. Where the real value of this book lies is in the substance that quantification lends to widely held, but qualitative, impressions. It is instructive, for example, to have a more precise indication of the proportion of indigenous soldiers in colonial armies (table 3.2), the size of settler communities as a percentage of entire colonial populations (table 11.1), or the comparative deaths due to disease and combat among European troops (appendix A).

Nevertheless, quantification brings its own methodological problems. These are not limited to having to rely on data that can be both incomplete and unreliable, and anyone who works in the field knows that statistics garnered by colonial administrators might be little better than impressionistic. This is especially so when population counts are derived from estimations based, for exam-

ple, on the payment of the hut tax in Africa. Potentially even more vexed is the matter of the initial creation of the categories in which the data is deployed. The author (as we have seen) satisfactorily justifies the temporal parameters of the study, but does not adequately explain why geographically contiguous empires have been excluded from consideration. After all, the most successful empires extant in the world today are those of Russia, China, and the United States. They still rule conquered and determinedly colonized territories like Siberia, Tibet, and the huge tracts ceded by Mexico. Difficulties also arise when dealing with the complicated and volatile ebb and flow of the frontier in sectors like southern Africa that render calculations of colonial areas and populations taken at set intervals decades apart of questionable comparative utility.

Such problems aside, this book represents a valiant attempt to bring quantitative methodology to a statistically slippery and emotively complex subject, and serves as a very useful corrective to technological determinism in explaining European colonialism.

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