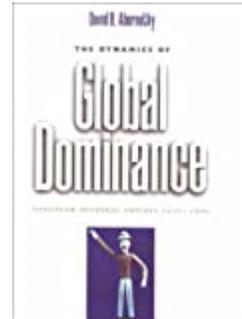




David B. Abernethy. *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires, 1415-1980.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. 524 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07304-1.



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The Triple Assault of Specialists in Power, Profit, and Proselytization

The Triple Assault of Specialists in Power, Profit, and Proselytization

David B. Abernethy, professor of political science at Stanford University, presents an impressive and far-reaching comparative analysis of the creation, character, collapse, and consequences of western Europe's overseas empires. He contends that Europeans developed a combination of highly distinctive political, economic, and religious institutions that were driven by a strong "explore-control-utilize syndrome." (p. 34) Together, Europeans successfully launched a "triple assault" on other societies, forever changing their forms of governance, patterns of economic development, and "ideas and values that gave meaning to life." (p. 12) While many indigenous peoples were "at a power disadvantage" (p. 39) when encountering the imperial powers, Abernethy also contends that non-Europeans "often contributed in important measure to their eventual colonization." (p. 255) Yet, European colonialism "eventually undercut itself" (p. 327) as the growth of Western-style nationalism and "[w]ars over the global distribution of power" undermined colonial control. (p. 360) The study concludes with a survey of

the various "legacies" of European imperialism and then a "moral evaluation" of colonial rule.

As Abernethy points out, western Europe's overseas expansion deserves careful study because it had a profound impact on the history of all continents and raises broader questions about many of the most important trends and pressing problems of modern international society. Joining Paul Kennedy, Charles Tilly, Marc Ferro, and Theodore H. Von Laue, Abernethy explains many of the broad patterns shaping the modern world.[1] While he readily admits that social scientists "run the risk of advancing overstated, oversimplified, and misleading generalizations" about the past, he insists that historians "run the opposite risk, in highlighting distinctness, of failing to identify patterns of human behavior that recur across boundaries of time, geography, and culture." (p. 24-25) He then asserts that "the social sciences are enriched when given historical depth, and that history is made more intellectually exciting when informed by social scientists' questions and approaches." (p. 25) Thus, this book sets out to apply comparative social science models to a wide range of historical episodes that be-

gin with the Portuguese conquest of Ceuta and end with the independence of Zimbabwe. The result is a well-organized theoretical analysis that is divided into seventeen chapters and is supported with many historical details.

Abernethy largely accomplishes his task. However, much of this success depends on readers accepting the rather specific scope and precise definitions contained in a chapter entitled “Why Did the Overseas Empires Rise, Persist, and Fall?” (pp. 18-42). This is the heart of the book. First, he makes it clear that he primarily concentrates on western Europe’s eight major “saltwater” empires (Portugal, Spain, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Italy) and not the European continental empires nor the later overseas empires of Japan and the United States. Second, he decides that a “dominant state” is an “imperial metropole” while a “weaker territory” is a “colony” only under a certain set of conditions. A dominant state must make formal claims to decide the weaker territory’s domestic and external relations. Further, the weaker territory is “not recognized as a sovereign state by major actors in the interstate system.” (p. 20) An imperial power must also have effective administrative control over some “economically or strategically significant portion” of the weaker territory. (p. 20) While Abernethy makes room for a few so-called “quasi colonies” including Canada and Kuwait, he excludes any type of “informal empire” and “the imperialism of free trade” (in Robinson and Gallagher’s famous phrase). Such a narrow focus on “legal-formal dimensions of power” (p. 22) makes it possible to avoid an extended study of Europe’s more indirect political and economic influence in parts of Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Third, within these precise confines, Abernethy is able to identify two distinctive “phases” of imperial “expansion” (1415-1773 and 1824-1912), two of “contraction” (1775-1824 and 1940-1980) and one intermediate period of “unstable equilibrium” (1914-1939) (p. 24).

These “conceptual tools” (p. 18) provide the structure for the rest of the book. They reflect the sort of mature conclusions that can come only after years of serious research and teaching in the social sciences.[2] The sweeping analysis rests on a masterful synthesis of a wide range of secondary sources available in English. The bibliography is excellent, particularly strong in directing readers to many of the best standard and recent works in African history. Most general readers will learn much. His discussion of the global consequences of imperialism, particularly the themes of “globalization” as well as racial and cultural diversity is timely. His subtle suggestions

that British colonialism was less “immoral” than other forms of European colonial rule will prompt constructive debate.

This book will serve as a fine source for students and teachers of modern European and world history, international relations, and comparative politics. With supplementary readings, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance* could serve as a main text in any upper-division or graduate course primarily concerned with modern imperialism and global order.

Still, some readers will not like this book. Those who still prefer “highlighting distinctness” and choose to avoid identifying those larger “patterns of human behavior” that span the world over the last five hundred years will probably continue to rely on less ambitious studies of European imperialism that accept fuzzier definitions, messier periodization, and greater scope for the actions of individuals.[3] Others will find the author’s use of first person narration distracting and his heavy reliance on lists, “bullets,” tables, and figures annoying. Further, many unsuspecting students will be burdened by prose that at times reads too much like a mathematics textbook. For example,

“C regards Europeans entering its territory as strangers. But it would think the same of D’s people if it knew of their existence. To C, Europeans and D are Others, just as for Europeans C and D are Others.

European offers to recruit C’s young men on a campaign to conquer D would not be met with indignant refusal on grounds that C and D have too many things in common to betray each other.” (p. 267)

Lastly, a few readers will lament that while the book contains good maps of Europe’s colonial empires in the Americas and Africa, there are no similarly useful maps for the Far East and the Pacific, central Asia, or the Middle East.

Notes

[1]. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987); Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* Rev. ed. (Cambridge, 1992); Ferro, *Colonization: A Global History* (London, 1997) and Von Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernization: The Twentieth Century in Global Perspective* (New York, 1987).

[2]. Abernethy’s *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education: An African Case* (Stanford, 1969) examines

the role of “ethnic missionaries” (p. 108) who emerged during the final stages of colonial rule to inform “rural masses” of their ethnicity in order to compete for wealth, power, and status with rival ethnic groups.

[3]. For example, see J. Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1982); Raymond F. Betts, *Uncertain Dimensions: Western Overseas*

Empires in the Twentieth Century (Minneapolis, 1985); M. E. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923* (London, 1987); Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (London, 1993) and Philip D. Curtin, *Disease and Empire: The Health of European Troops in the Conquest of Africa* (Cambridge, 1998). Abernethy lists most of these works in his bibliography.

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