

Pinker, and Hans Rosling, I do not believe that we are living through the worst of times, that the economic position of most of the world's population has not improved dramatically over the last thirty years, or that political liberalism—"the world's most successful political idea"—is in its death throes.

Peter A. Coclanis is Albert R. Newsome Distinguished Professor of History and director of the Global Research Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Turbulent Empires: A History of Global Capitalism since 1945. By Mike Mason. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. xiii + 329 pp. Tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-7735-5321-7.

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Reviewed by David C. Engerman

Mike Mason's *Turbulent Empires* is a difficult book to review. It is clearly based on a half century of reading, teaching, and reflection on the past, the present predicament, and perhaps even the future of global capitalism. It aspires to a truly global reach, looking well beyond the major industrial states to describe the recent economic and political histories of much of the globe. And it seeks to offer a fitting extension of Eric Hobsbawm's famous world histories, starting midway through his *Age of Extremes* and extending well past that book's 1991 end point.

Yet *Turbulent Empires*, in spite of these virtues, does not add significantly to our knowledge of recent economic histories of the world. It is so devoted to geographic and thematic breadth that the book presents only glimmers of an argument about the turbulence of the postwar world—for which Mason blames global capitalism. The book's brief preface and afterword, which together amount to fewer than ten pages, do mention a few broader themes. First, as adverted in Mason's earlier *Global Shift: Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 1945–2007* (2013), the book devotes more attention to Asia than Hobsbawm did; this should be an uncontroversial position to stake out in 2018. *Turbulent Empires* calls on readers to consider American hegemony as the driving force in the world economy for many decades, now facing dire (or at least direct) challenge from China. Finally and most importantly, the book insists upon the "turbulence" of capitalism, an unsurprising perspective at least since the age of Joseph Schumpeter.

After announcing turbulence as the overriding characteristic of global capitalism since the end of World War II, Mason embarks on nine geographically defined chapters, or “snapshots” (p. xi). Most are regions, though the United States and China rightly get chapters of their own. While most chapters unfold according to their own regional logics, a few common concepts appear: a “commodities supercycle,” apparently about price and demand fluctuations; the unevenness of economic growth both between and within individual nations; and the political effects of economic volatility and inequality (p. 240).

These recurring themes, however, do not amount to a clearly articulated argument about the origins, nature, or consequences of global capitalism. The chapters vary in approach; many devote a few pages to each of a number of exemplary countries. Taken together, the chapters reveal an impressively broad reading in newspapers, scholarly monographs, and analyses of contemporary politics and economics intended for a broader audience. At their best, these accounts distill complex events over an extended period into brief and readable prose. At other times, however, these “snapshots” can get blurry; they can focus on tidbits about political leaders—for example, the forms of torture that Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff endured—rather than the link between economic and political volatility (p. 233). Or they move with dizzying speed; the section on Ghana, for instance, moves from the 1966 coup against Kwame Nkrumah to the end of Joseph Rawling’s presidency in 2001 to Bono and Jeffrey Sachs’s visit to the country in 2012 in six short paragraphs, one of which is an extended quotation (pp. 198–200). While such coverage is admirable, such pacing is not conducive to making or supporting analytical claims. Most frustratingly, the chapters often introduce new terminology without adequate explanation or points of reference: British Prime Minister Tony Blair promoted “neoliberal socialism,” for instance, while Iran’s ayatollahs built a “neoliberal theocracy” (pp. 103, 175). Not all of such terms revolve around neoliberalism, though that term is used in many different ways to describe a wide variety of sins (at least in Mason’s telling).

While emphasizing the turbulence of capitalism is undoubtedly a worthwhile effort in understanding post-1945 world history, the book has little space for other forms or causes of turbulence: Cold War ideological conflict, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, communal violence, and growing social and political inclusiveness, to name a few. To take one example, while the changing composition and direction of American trade was no doubt a factor in growing concerns about the winners and losers from international trade, it seems somewhat simplistic to suggest, as Mason does, that the domestic response to growing American imports from China was “ultimately the election of Donald

Trump” (p. 244). Surely other factors—both structural and long-term as well as contingent—came into play.

Turbulent Empires, then, is best read as a reporter’s notebook about economics and politics in the post-1945 world. While it lacks the you-were-there sense of Robert Kaplan’s writings, Mason’s book takes an expansive view of the post-World War II world and offers some useful insights in prose that is unburdened by academic stuffiness.

David C. Engerman is Leitner International Interdisciplinary Professor at Yale University. He is the author, most recently, of The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India (2018).

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Accounting for Capitalism: The World the Clerk Made. *By Michael Zakim.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. ix + 247 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN: 978-0-226-97797-3.

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Reviewed by Brian P. Luskey

Michael Zakim’s new book is an exemplar of recent scholarship on American capitalism in the nineteenth century. Zakim’s succinct, elegant, and smart prose will not surprise readers of his previous work (*Ready-Made Democracy* [2003] and *Capitalism Takes Command* [2012]). The impressive methodological breadth of the book under review might do so. Zakim finds capital’s history in unlikely places, from material objects to the built environment, from people’s bodies to the compiling of the federal census. Like the best practitioners in the field, though, he is adept at showing how these multiple methodologies are absolutely necessary if we are to comprehend the intimate relationship between capitalism and American society.

Capitalism, Zakim explains, constituted an economic and social revolution that unfolded in the commercial counting room as much as in the artisanal crafts. At desks and store counters, a burgeoning group of young, male clerks took hold of an array of materials—pen, ink, paper—to produce that revolution in text and transaction. Their busy-ness created columns of debts and credits, correspondence, and contracts that did not merely reflect the market. Clerks’ work made the flow of capital and credit legible and, in cultural terms, legitimate. Clerks, the foot soldiers in this revolution, encountered the considerable health risks of hunching over desks in service to capital’s commands. Digestive, optical, and postural maladies were the clerks’ lot, born of their alienation from farm and workshop and the industrial revolution