

Review Article

Reconsidering the macro-narrative in global history: John Darwin's *After Tamerlane* and the case for comparison

After Tamerlane: the rise and fall of global empires, 1400–2000

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John Darwin's *After Tamerlane: the rise and fall of global empires, 1400–2000* is in many ways an impressive exemplar of the macro-narrative approach to world history that has been, perhaps, the most widely adopted by practitioners in the field since the publication of William McNeill's path-breaking *Rise of the West* four and a half decades ago. In just under 600 pages of text, Darwin provides a well-argued, nuanced yet clear, and highly informative overview of more than half a millennium of cross-continental interaction and exchange, which he consistently links to his core theme – the rise and fall of regional and then global empires. Obviously a work attempting such an ambitious range of temporal and spatial coverage cannot be based on extensive archival research. However, Darwin skillfully builds a coherent synthesis by combining published primary sources (usually in English or translated into English) to supplement a selective, but informed, reading of what, in the past half-century, has become a vast secondary literature on the regional histories that have shaped the often-erratic emergence of a genuinely global order. His penchant for deploying quotations from memoirs and contemporary documents that succinctly sum

up key arguments or capture the broader themes that he is seeking to elucidate is particularly impressive. And, though much of what he has to say will be familiar to those who teach and write about world history, Darwin enlivens his narrative with fresh perspectives on subjects as diverse as the geophysical layout of Europe – which (presumably elaborating on Paul Valéry) he treats as a collection of peninsulas protruding from Asia – and the contrasts between Victorian Britain and the contemporary United States as global hegemony.

Beginning with a well-conceived survey of the state of various Eurasian empires *circa* 1500, Darwin sets out to decentre the overwhelmingly European-focused macro-narrative that has dominated thinking and writing about the rise and fall of expansive colonizing polities for centuries. He is able to sustain this shift in perspective quite well through the early chapters, which converge in his discussion of the factors leading to the 'great divergence', which has received a great deal of attention on the part of world historians in recent years. But, as European nation-empires outflank and begin to encircle the Islamic gunpowder empires and eventually China and Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, transformations in western Europe and European enterprises overseas inexorably reclaim their familiar position at the heart of Darwin's global narrative. He is able to offset this trend somewhat by adopting a second, more original perspective-altering strategy that consists of well-focused and perceptive discussions of the weaknesses and failures of European colonizing enterprises and their persisting dependence on colonized peoples for all manner of imperial endeavours, from trade and war to the governance of conquered territories. Darwin's attention to the weaknesses and vulnerability of even empires on the rise or at the peak of their global power greatly enhances his superb discussions of what he sees as key factors that favour some empire-minded societies over others,

in each of the seven main phases that he delineates for the half-millennium *After Tamerlane*. It is noteworthy in this regard that his periodization diverges in interesting and cogent ways from the standard narrative. Though salutary, Darwin's call for more attention to cultural causal variables is not followed through in what becomes predominantly a study of the political economy of early modern and modern empires.

Despite the considerable breath of Darwin's reading of the secondary literature, the sheer volume of the extant scholarship – much of the best of it published in the last five or six decades – on the history of the many areas and themes that he seeks to trace over several centuries overwhelms his efforts to provide a source base that is comprehensive enough, sufficiently inclusive of seminal works, and attuned to sub-field debates to be fully satisfying. His abbreviated discussions of complex processes and contentious issues result in partial and, at times, somewhat dated explanations and, judging from his citations, reliance on a rather narrow base of evidence that is compatible with his narrative agenda. As I shall argue in the review essay that follows, the questions that arise in relation to Darwin's choice and handling of sources are symptomatic of a broader range of problems that are found not only in *After Tamerlane* but are characteristic of the macro-narrative approach to world history more generally. At the same time, I need to stress that I find Darwin's work especially appropriate for addressing larger methodological issues precisely because it is one of the best examples of the macro-narrative genre yet to appear, and because he is a perceptive, careful craftsman, who has written widely and productively from a comparative perspective on regional processes and themes that have important global resonances.

As John Goldthorpe pointed out decades ago,¹ when historians working across cultures at the macro-causal level base their analysis on secondary sources, they have to choose between opposing interpretations with little or only a limited command of the evidentiary base that supports or calls into question each alternative. And their choices are very likely to bolster rather than complicate, much less run counter to, their line of argument. Though Darwin rightly cautions, for example, against 'grand

generalizations about stasis and stagnation' (p. 125) in attempting to explain the decline of the Qing empire, beginning in the late eighteenth century, he nonetheless concludes that 'underlying conservatism,' 'entrenched social tendencies' (p. 132), and the alien, nomadic origins of its Manchu overlords were critical to its downfall. But his understanding of the nature of Manchu domination and of the sources of the Chinese scholar-gentry elite's inability to cope effectively with both internal dislocations and the coming challenges of the West might have been very differently conceived if he had made use of the contributions of influential scholars such as Frederic Wakeman, Jr, Peter Perdue, Ping-ti Ho, Joanna Waley-Cohen, and Joseph Levenson's magisterial *Confucian China and its modern fate*.² The work of these and other neglected historians of the Qing era would surely have raised vital questions with the potential to enrich or problematize Darwin's causal arguments relating to imperial 'decline'.

The writings of Wakeman and Perdue among others might have prodded Darwin to take more seriously the extent to which the Manchu overlords had embraced Confucian norms and adopted Han-Chinese institutions even before they breached the Great Wall. After all, as Darwin does allow, the early Manchu emperors presided over a largely unified, powerful, and prosperous empire for over 150 years. The thorough statistical analyses of Ping-ti Ho would have underscored the ever-increasing pressures of unprecedented levels of population growth in the Qing era, and perhaps impressed Darwin, who has little to say about population trends or epidemiology in the book as a whole,

1 John H. Goldthorpe, 'The uses of history in sociology: reflections on some recent tendencies', *British Journal of Sociology*, 42, 2, 1991, pp. 211–30.

2 Frederic Wakeman, Jr, *The great enterprise: the Manchu reconstruction of the imperial order in seventeenth-century China*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985; Peter Perdue, *China marches west: the Qing conquest of Central Eurasia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005; Ping-ti Ho, 'The introduction of American food plants into China', *American Anthropologist*, 57, 2, 1955, pp. 191–201, and *Studies on the population of China, 1368–1953*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959; Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The sextants of Beijing: global currents in Chinese history*, New York: Norton, 1999, and *The culture of war in China: empire and the military under the Qing dynasty*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006; and Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its modern fate: a trilogy*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968.

with the enduring importance of demographic factors in determining the fate of empires. Darwin's treatment of government responses to both internal and external challenges would have benefited greatly from an exploration of the education and sensibilities of the dilettantish scholar-gentry who ran the imperial bureaucracy and, as Joseph Levenson has shown, were inclined to underestimate, if not despise, European merchant and military interlopers as crude, unaccomplished materialists and poorly tutored, narrow-minded specialists. And with regard to the scholar-gentry's resistance to influences from the West, which was to a significant degree motivated by these assumptions, the ultimate failure of the Jesuit missions to Beijing in the late Ming and Qing centuries (which Darwin mentions only in passing) cut short potential avenues for adjustment and adaptation on the part of China's elite to the dangers posed by the intrusive Westerners.³ More broadly, engaging the ongoing debates that have been central to the historiography of both the late Qing and Ottoman empires over the relative importance of internal decay as opposed to Western and other external challenges would have further complicated Darwin's discussions of the fate of these pivotal empires and the regions they dominated for centuries – in the case of the Ottomans, both before and after Tamerlane.

The surprising omission of seminal works in discussions of many of the key processes that Darwin asserts influenced the waxing and waning of imperial powers is particularly disconcerting. None of the many contributions of Philip Curtin and Charles Verlinden, for example, are brought to bear on his all-too-brief treatment of the plantation system in the Mediterranean, which provided a major impetus for Iberian expansion into the Atlantic, and, as it spread into the Caribbean and the Americas, became a key source of export crops, capital accumulation, and commercial exchange for Spanish and Portuguese empire builders (and soon thereafter for their northern European rivals).⁴ Darwin's scant attention

to these foundational works and the larger literature (which admittedly has become daunting both in volume and quality) on the Atlantic networks that encompassed some of the most critical dimensions of world history in the early modern era is apparent in the peripheralization of the plantation complex in his larger scheme of analysis. And this positioning reflects a broader tendency in some recent analyses of the shifting fortunes of key culture areas in the global arena to see slave plantations as a residual category in accounting for these transformations. In this view, the land and resources of the Americas proved a 'windfall' that helps to account for the fact that the nations of the West escaped what Mark Elvin labelled decades ago the 'pre-modern high-level equilibrium trap'.⁵ In turn, surmounting this obstacle enabled several European nations (and later the United States) to achieve global dominance, while 'the rest' of the world's empires disintegrated and disappeared.⁶ Darwin's failure to consult even the standard accounts (again, admittedly imposing in number, quality, and levels of contestation) of the settling of North America and post-Turnerian interpretations of the meaning of the frontier in the rise of the United States as a continental, then global, power presages another marginalization in *After Tamerlane*, which is as unsettling as his neglect of the Caribbean and Latin America.

University Press, 1970, and 'Les Origines coloniales de la civilisation Atlantique: antécédents et types de structure', *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale*, 1943, pp. 378–98. For some of the more recent contributions on the role of slavery in global-imperial perspective that, judging from his endnotes, were also not consulted by Darwin, see Robin Blackburn, *The making of New World slavery: from the baroque to the modern, 1492–1800*, New York: Verso, 1997; David Eltis, *The rise of African slavery in the Americas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; and Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history*, New York: Penguin, 1986.

3 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985; and George Minamiki, *The Christian rites controversy: from its beginning to modern times*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985.

4 Philip D. Curtin, *The rise and fall of the plantation complex: essays in Atlantic history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; and Charles Verlinden, *The beginnings of modern colonization*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell

5 Mark Elvin, 'The high-level equilibrium trap: the causes of the decline of invention in the traditional Chinese textile industries', in W. E. Wilmott, ed., *Economic organization in Chinese society*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972, pp. 137–72.

6 For a prominent example of this line of argument, see Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

The coherence that Darwin is able to distil from the diverse societies, processes, and shifting time-frames that figure in his macro-narrative is enhanced by his consistent return in each phase that he delineates in the half-millennium *After Tamerlane* to the patterns of imperial expansion and decline in six regional core areas – Europe, the Middle East (particularly the Ottoman heartlands), Russia, South Asia, China, and Japan. From the late nineteenth century onwards, he also attempts to provide regular updates on key trends in the United States. Not surprisingly, Europe and (in the later chapters of the study) America receive ever greater attention over time, and they are increasingly treated as the seedbeds of the innovations, economic transformations, social change, and global enterprises that drive world history. The inevitable downside of this necessary concession to the ambitious time span and range of regions and themes that Darwin seeks to cover is the erratic and often cursory treatment that much of the rest of the world receives. Despite brief forays into the world beyond, *After Tamerlane* is basically a history of the rise and fall of empires in Eurasia.

Even Darwin's laudable attempts in the early chapters to decentre Europe, by stressing that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a time of expansion for regional empires over much of the inhabited world, consists mainly of catalogues of wars of conquest and territorial acquisition for all areas but Europe, the Middle East, and China. And he makes no mention of David Ringrose's pioneering and superb comparative analysis of imperial expansionism from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, which includes in-depth case studies of empires in the Americas, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia.⁷ Darwin does give some attention to Africa and Latin America in this era but, in contrast to Ringrose, his overviews are too abbreviated to gain a meaningful understanding of the Amerindian or African societies that built expansive empires or to assess the place of these aggressive polities in the interactions and exchanges that are central to his analysis of the globalization of imperial domination in the centuries *After Tamerlane*. Throughout the book, the continents of Africa and North and South America are essentially treated as zones of conquest, great power contestation, and exploitation. Brazil, for example, is scarcely

mentioned and the Iberian–Creole presence there is dismissed as a 'feeble assault' (p. 164). The 'opening' (map label, p. 307) of Africa is dismissed as a 'sideshow' (p. 305), and its conquest is judged to be 'exceptionally rapid and . . . extraordinarily complete' (p. 306). Little is made of the fierce resistance that the Europeans faced on all three continents, or of the fates of conquered indigenous peoples. And, once again, essential demographic factors – in these cases, of the epidemiological and hoofed-quadruped variety – appear, on the basis of Darwin's analysis, to have little or nothing to do with the march of Europeans to global dominion. He fails to take into account the devastating impact of the transfer of Afro-Eurasian diseases on the Spanish conquests in the Americas, which he characterizes as a military blitzkrieg. Nor does he consider the ways in which the calamitous die-off of much of the pre-contact population of the Americas in the first centuries of Iberian colonization shaped the nature of Spanish and Portuguese settlement and systems of extraction. Darwin does not factor the disease environment in Africa into his account of the advance (or failures of) European enterprise and empire-building there in either the early centuries of expansion or the decades of the imperialist scramble. Consequently, one is left without a hint of the profound effects that disease and climate had on the conduct of the slave trade or of the complex connections between the colonization of Africa and the use of quinine as a prophylactic, and the emergence of germ theory and allopathic medicine more generally.⁸

As one would expect in a book on the rise and fall of empires, Darwin's narrative includes a good many references to wars and battles. But these are almost never considered in any depth or in terms of the ways in which they epitomize broader transformations in the nature of warfare or result in shifts

7 David Ringrose, *Expansion and global interaction, 1200–1700*, New York: Addison, Wesley, Longman, Inc., 2000.

8 Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian exchange: biological and cultural consequences of 1492*, Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1972, and *Ecological imperialism: the biological expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Philip Curtin, *The image of Africa: British ideas and action, 1780–1850*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964, and *Death by migration: Europe's encounter with the tropical world in the nineteenth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; and Elinor Melville, *A plague of sheep: environmental consequences of the conquest of Mexico*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

in the distribution of power among regions across the globe. His failure to follow up on these often pivotal, causal connections is particularly puzzling because some of the more cogent passages in *After Tamerlane* are those that Darwin devotes to analyses of economic trends that undergirded the emergence and decline of empires. He does deal in a general (and what has become a rather formulaic) way with the links between new weapons and logistical improvements associated with the industrial revolution and Western imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. But these trends are not connected to the importance of new communications technologies, expanding intelligence capacities, improved statistical gathering, and new modes of surveillance and classification that rendered colonized societies and subject peoples considerably more 'legible'.⁹ These advances meant that the far-flung empires of the great powers could be more closely policed and surveilled, their labour power more effectively drawn into schemes to boost the productivity of the colonies, and their manpower mobilized in ever increasing numbers for service in the bureaucracy and in imperial wars, both in other areas of Africa and Asia targeted for colonization and conflicts between the great powers, most especially in the First World War, which would stretch the European empires to the limits of their resources.¹⁰ As Darwin's earlier studies of decolonization make clear¹¹ (but which he inexplicably only mentions in passing in *After Tamerlane*), these new technologies and improved modes of organization were mainly

deployed in the actual administration of the European (and American) empires by Asian and African subordinate officials, soldiers, and policemen. Ironically, the colonizers' dependence on indigenous notables, soldiers, and police officers not only increased the regional and local control of the latter but proved a critical factor in the drives for decolonization that eviscerated the Western empires from within in the half century after the First World War.

For the earlier centuries of empire-building, Darwin has little to say about what has come to be known as the 'military revolution', which spanned the sixteenth to eighteenth century. He never really links major advances in organization, logistics, and discipline – which on land at least were arguably more critical than new weaponry until the eighteenth century – to the global transformations that they did so much to bring about. And, again judging from his citations, he fails to take seriously into account essential interpretive studies of these processes, in this case most notably William McNeill's *Pursuit of power* and Geoffrey Parker's study of *The military revolution*, which is even more globally oriented and astute in its application of the comparative method than McNeill's earlier work.¹² This failure to address the military revolution compounds missed opportunities to stress the far-reaching repercussions of an even more fundamental shift in the military and political balance of power worldwide, one that is often not explicitly or fully factored into works dealing with the impact of military innovations in global history. The improvements in metallurgy, firearms, and logistical technologies that culminated in the introduction of mobile field artillery on the battlefields of Europe in the eighteenth century¹³ sealed the eclipse of nomadic societies from central Asia to the American west as major and persisting military forces to be reckoned with and seedbeds of cavalry-based empires. These were roles that pastoral nomadic peoples had assumed on a recurring basis over

9 See James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

10 Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996; E. A. Brett, *Colonialism and underdevelopment in East Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; Colin Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979; John Morrow, Jr, *The Great War: an imperial history*, London: Routledge, 2004; and Marc Michel, *L'Appel à l'Afrique: contributions et réactions à l'effort de guerre en A.O.F., 1914–1919*, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982.

11 John Darwin, *Britain and decolonization: the retreat from empire in the post-war world*, New York: St. Martin's, 1988, and *The end of empire: the historical debate*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

12 William McNeill, *The pursuit of power: technology, armed force, and society since A.D. 1000*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982; Geoffrey Parker, *The military revolution: military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500–1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

13 For a concise overview of these developments, see Hew Strachan, *European armies and the conduct of war*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1983, pp. 32–4.

much of the globe, at least since the Neolithic millennia that saw the emergence of sedentary agriculture. Thus this watershed transformation is of obvious importance to Darwin's exploration of the forces that shape the rise and fall of empires, as evidenced by the amount of attention that he gives to the advance of agrarian-based, gunpowder empires from Qing China and Tsarist Russia to Ottoman expansion in the Middle East and north Africa. And, though he does connect the post-industrial endgame of this process – when railways, telegraph lines, and machine guns were added to the arsenals of expanding continental empires – he does not take into account the underlying significance of the eclipse of the military power of nomadic, pastoral societies, which opened vast expanses of steppes and plains to conquest and colonial domination.

Darwin does provide an extended narrative overview of the Seven Years War (1756–63) in Europe and its global offshoots on three continents that in effect served as a bridge between the early modern gunpowder empires and post-industrial imperialism. Inexplicably, however, he does not compare the strengths and weaknesses of the French and British nation-empires, whose military clashes determined the outcome of what was arguably the first genuinely global war. And he fails to explore the ways in which French defeats and the resulting contraction of their overseas colonies contributed to the demise of the first French empire a couple of decades later, or, conversely, how British victories catapulted the island nation to an unprecedented level of global dominance, which it would sustain for well over a century.¹⁴ Darwin's chapter on the 'The race against time' in the next phase of imperial rivalries worldwide in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century is perhaps his strongest, in large part because it includes some of the fullest analysis of resistance to expansive empires (mostly European in this case). But, again, he makes little attempt to grapple with the broader patterns exhibited by yet another round of military transformations, which included (among others) major

advances in hand weaponry, artillery, the training and direction of mass armies, and the foundation of war colleges to produce leaders capable of coping with these changes.¹⁵ Understanding these changes, which would radically alter the future conduct of war, is essential for the final sections of Darwin's study because they set the stage for the industrial powers' partitions of Africa and the Pacific from the 1860s onward and for the disasters of the First World War. In my view, he also greatly underestimates the grave dangers and profound consequences of the great power scramble for colonies and their competition for military supremacy on land and sea in the decades leading up to the First World War. Characterizing the division of Africa, for example, as a 'peaceful partition' (p. 315) – even if, as Darwin cautions, only for the Europeans – seriously understates the importance of the recurring threat of war between varying combinations of the European nation-empires that these intense rivalries for territorial gains engendered. All through the decades of the *fin de siècle*, they fed fears and set in motion forces that first gave rise to and then increasingly rigidified the hostile alliance systems that marched to the global war that would destroy or greatly diminish them all in 1914. Great power clashes over colonies also created the persisting crisis atmosphere that fed the pervasive assumption that a full-scale war between the industrial powers was inevitable.¹⁶

In the decades on either side of 1900, there were also a number of localized conflicts, usually sparked by the meddling of rival empires, that fanned

14 These issues are treated with insight and at some length in Frank McLynn's *1759: the year that made Great Britain the master of the world*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004. The war in the decisive North American theatre is covered in greatest detail in Fred Anderson's *Crucible of war: the seven years' war and the fate of empire in British North America*, New York: Vintage, 2000.

15 See Strachan, *European armies*, chs 4–8; William McElwee, *The art of war: Waterloo to Mons*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974; and Cyril Falls, *A hundred years of war*, New York: Macmillan, 1953, chs 1–10.

16 The more revealing of the works that deal extensively with the imperial dimensions of the origins and conduct of the war of empires that raged from 1914–1918 include Morrow, *The Great War*; Paul Kennedy, *The rise of the Anglo-German antagonism, 1860–1914*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1980; the second volume of Gerhard Ritter's magnum opus, *The sword and the scepter*, trans. Heinz Norden, Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970; L. C. F. Fuller, *Origins of the First World War*, New York: Norton, 1970, and Zara Steiner, *Britain and the origins of the First World War*, London: Macmillan, 1977.

national-imperial animosities and prompted major, pre-1914 political and military adjustments that significantly influenced the coming and course of the First World War. Darwin considers only one of these, the Russo-Japanese War, at any length, and he finesses a series of tense standoffs in North Africa and critical conflicts in the Balkans, dismissing the latter as rather routine in ‘an inaccessible region steeped in a tradition of localized violence’ (p. 371). Even more problematically for his narratives on the fate of empires in the twentieth century, Darwin deals very selectively with the devastating effects of both World Wars. Not surprisingly, given his longstanding research interests, he has insightful things to say about the ways in which both conflicts undermined the European, particularly the British, overseas empires. But his treatment of the empires that these global conflicts utterly destroyed, and of the industrial powers on the peripheries – the United States and Japan after 1918; America and the Soviet Union after 1945 – that emerged as dominant powers through the rest of the twentieth century, is at best patchy and thin. Moreover, he has almost nothing to say about the rise of cadre-based guerrilla warfare, which became the preferred and most successful mode of peasant-based resistance to the great powers, particularly in the decades after the Second World War. Darwin’s short-changing of the impact of warfare on the fate of empires in the twentieth century is compounded by his neglect of the equally pervasive effects of revolutionary violence. Most egregiously in this regard, he gives minimal attention to the coming and course of the Chinese and Russian revolutions that put an end to the Qing and Romanov empires and gave rise to their Soviet and Maoist successors. And he has even less to say about the peoples’ wars in Vietnam and Cuba, which withstood the unprecedented power and influence of the American global hegemon.

As the foregoing suggests, the main strengths of *After Tamerlane* are its well-written narrative and lucid analytical passages, in which Darwin explores several trends or shifts in the configuration of historical forces that he believes were decisive in shaping the history of empire at various points in time. And Darwin’s reliance on a fairly stable set of imperial case examples lends coherence to his macro-narrative. However, the sheer scope of the book precludes adequately contextualized case studies, which may in turn account for his failure to draw on the similarities and differences that close comparison could illuminate in order to discern underlying divergences or persisting patterns in regional empires, or

even between western European and expansionist polities elsewhere in Eurasia. One has little sense that he is working from consistently applied categories of analysis that have been extracted from his case examples collectively rather than drawn primarily from the extensive literature on great powers of Europe that has very often been the main or exclusive focus of studies on the dynamics of empire. The absence of sustained comparative inquiry also makes it difficult for Darwin to build an original framework with broad applicability for understanding the dynamics of empire in world historical perspective. In this regard, however much one might wish to modify or problematize the factors that Paul Kennedy has argued were decisive in his influential study of *The rise and fall of the Great Powers*,¹⁷ his analysis of these dynamics is consistent, well-supported, provocative, and memorable. In contrast, one does not come away from a reading of *After Tamerlane* with a clear sense of what these forces might be, and if and how they change over time.

Perversely, these problems are most evident in Darwin’s most analytical and compelling chapter, on what he terms ‘The Eurasian revolution’. In assessing the impact and timing of the ‘great divergence’ between European nation-empires and the rest of human societies, which many historians have argued or assumed opened the way for Western global dominance, Darwin has a good deal to say that is incisive and persuasive about the causal underpinnings of this process. But his macro-narrative approach inclines him to favour comparing whole civilizations or culture areas in ways that are similar to a number of scholars who have recently challenged the long-dominant, exceptionalist, and Eurocentric interpretations of these transformations. In countering what they see as wrong-headed, triumphalist claims on the part of prominent scholars such as David Landes and E. L. Jones,¹⁸ advocates of a variety of revisionist perspectives have sought to decentre the standard narrative that charts the rise of the West. Darwin draws little from works such as Andre Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient* that are devoted to demonstrating that, for much of human

17 New York: Random House, 1987.

18 David S. Landes, *The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so wealthy and some so poor*, New York: Norton, 1998; and E. L. Jones, *The European miracle: environments, economies and geopolitics in the history of Europe and Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

history, western Europe lagged behind other Eurasian culture areas, particularly China.¹⁹ He relies instead on more solidly grounded, comparative studies – based on extensive readings of non-European archival and published primary sources – particularly the work of Kenneth Pomeranz. Confining their time-frame to the same half millennium that Darwin spans in his narrative, and stressing socio-economic variables, these revisionists have sought to demonstrate that Europe had, at best, only achieved overall parity with the empires of China, India, and possibly the Middle East by the first decades of European expansion, and only gradually forged ahead in the following centuries.²⁰

In a number of pivotal passages in the Eurasian revolution chapter, Darwin appears to subscribe fully to the most recent revisionist approaches to the causes and nature of the great divergence. He explicitly concurs with Pomeranz's central contentions that Europe's rise to global dominance began only at the end of the eighteenth century and was based largely on Great Britain's ready access to coal, which fuelled the first industrial revolution, and the capacity of western European nation-empires to exploit the seemingly unlimited lands and resources of the Americas and Africa. Elsewhere in the chapter, however, Darwin displays a good deal of ambivalence about ruling out causal factors linked to innovative developments within Europe, as well as the related tendency to obfuscate the well-documented ways in which some regions, sectors, and social groups in western Europe had begun to diverge from all other human societies long before the burst of innovations associated with the industrial watershed.²¹ Because he has not provided substantial or well-rounded case studies of Europe's non-Western competitors, Darwin cannot intervene

in these controversies in original ways based on his own comparisons between Europe and other culture areas that gave rise to powerful and expansive empires. Ironically, this compels him to depend heavily on some of the standard works, including E. L. Jones' aptly entitled *European miracle*, which adopt an internalist, exceptionalist approach to these processes. Not only might extended comparisons among the core culture areas to which he consistently returns have resolved some of Darwin's conflicted, even at times contradictory, responses to the global divergences debate, but they would have made possible far more path-breaking, coherent, and persuasive rejoinders to intensely argued and highly productive controversies that have captivated generations of world historians.

Like all counterfactuals, Pomeranz's central thesis – on which Darwin ultimately falls back – that, without ample and accessible domestic coal reserves and resources extracted from much of the rest of the world, Europe would not have been able to escape from the high-level equilibrium trap that ensnared Qing China is speculative. It also runs counter to a mass of evidence concerning the internal dynamics of European commerce, production, and inventiveness. Darwin discusses some of these developments, at times in interesting ways, but, compelled by the need to get on with his meta-narrative, he cannot give them the attention they deserve. Though the assumption that Europe's economic growth and social transformations in the early modern era depended heavily on external trade and extractive enterprises has long been problematized,²² Darwin implicitly makes this case through the emphasis that he places on the external enterprises of Western nation-empires and their effects. Like those of Pomeranz, Darwin's comparisons are primarily socioeconomic and ultimately (despite some attention to regional variations) focused on the overall attributes of whole 'civilizations'. But, though economic advances, technological innovation, and general indices of prosperity or investment were part of the story, a combination of *selective advantages* and *particular needs* in diverse social sectors and areas of endeavour provided the main impetus for Europe's overseas expansion and its later rise to

19 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian age*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

20 Pomeranz, *The great divergence*.

21 Joseph Bryant has mounted the most thorough and cogent critique of these interpretive moves: see, 'The West and the rest revisited: debating capitalist origins, European colonialism, and the advent of modernity', *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahier Canadien de Sociologie*, 31, 4, 2006, pp. 403–44. Also useful on these issues is Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'The great convergence from a West-European perspective: some thoughts and hypotheses', *Itinerario*, 24, 3 and 4, 2000, pp 9–29.

22 Perhaps the boldest corrective was offered decades ago in Patrick O'Brien's pioneering (and much debated) essay on 'European economic development: the contribution of the periphery,' *Economic History Review*, 35, 1, 1982, pp. 1–18.

global dominance. Moreover, the processes that gave rise to many of Europe's advances were underway long before the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century, and, in some cases, centuries before the early decades of overseas exploration.

The earliest breakthroughs included converging agricultural transformations, which enhanced population increase within western European societies and their capacity to incorporate food crops later imported from overseas, and advances in mining, metalworking, harnessing wind and water power, and instrumentation, which John Nef has argued amounted to a 'first industrial revolution'.²³ These developments were given further impetus by, and in turn contributed to, fundamental changes in the way that many Europeans, especially those of educated and skilled artisan social groups, viewed all manner of phenomena, from the relationship between humans and nature and the potential for societal improvement to the workings of the cosmos and the extent to which 'industriousness' and material success became social norms.²⁴ Even though these intellectual and cultural forces shaped the motives and means for exploration and empire-building in important ways – and eventually culminated in clusters of fundamental breakthroughs, first in the sciences and later in industrial technologies – they receive little notice in Darwin's discussion of

the great divergence. And this neglect of the cultural dimensions of Europe's rise to global pre-eminence is evident throughout *After Tamerlane*, in which Darwin treats ideas and ideologies, including those with obvious relevance to the rise and fall of empires, as afterthoughts in abbreviated, isolated summaries of major trends in selected imperial metropolises. As these examples suggest, the debate regarding the nature and causes of the great divergence needs to be waged through comparison of selective advantages and needs rather than aggregate 'civilizational' attributes. And it is imperative that the forces that gave rise to key innovations and enterprises should be tracked across a range of categories of analysis, from geography (extent of orientation to the sea, levels of sailing and navigational skills, access to advances in other culture areas) and political organization (ability to mobilize natural resources and manpower, degree of centralization and competition – whether in weaponry or ideas) to *mentalités* (the uses of the sea for sustenance or war, attitudes towards the extraction of natural resources), fears (of encirclement or outward flows of precious metals), and needs (to tap into overseas trading networks and cut out rivals).

Despite frequent interjections of original and deep insight into historical causality, Darwin's methodological shortcomings go far to account for the often vague and indecisive quality of the conceptual dimensions of his meta-narrative as a whole. His purposeful use, for example, of anachronistic terminology with a good deal of historical baggage – including 'blitzkrieg', 'final solution', and 'mother of unequal treaties' – to suggest new ways of looking at apparently unrelated processes – respectively, the Spanish conquest of the Americas, the Europeans' refusal to put an end to failed regimes such as the Qing, and the treaty of Versailles – is misconceived and at times unsettling. Definitions, even of such key concepts as empire, imperialism, and what he means by rise and decline are introduced, if at all, on a rather ad hoc basis, and often belatedly. He makes little attempt to distinguish different types of empire. Thus, settler colonies, informal interventionism, and formal colonization are jumbled together despite their divergent structures, varying modes of operation, and often very different outcomes. This imprecision makes it possible, for example, for him to characterize South Africa as a 'strange mutation' (p. 317), when comparison reveals that it had much in common with Algeria, Kenya, and a range of other settler societies with substantial indigenous populations. And these include, as George Fredrickson has

23 The seminal works on each of the main clusters of these late medieval and early modern transformations are, respectively, Lynn White, Jr, *Medieval technology and social change*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962 and John Nef, *The conquest of the material world*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964. Neither is referenced in *After Tamerlane*.

24 Of the many fine works on scientific investigation and altered worldviews in early modern Europe, those dealing extensively with the pivotal transitions suggested above include A. Rupert Hall, *The revolution in science 1500–1750*, London: Longman, 1983; Allen G. Debus, *Man and nature in the Renaissance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978; Carolyn Merchant, *The death of nature: women, ecology and the scientific revolution*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980; Keith Thomas, *Man and the natural world: changing attitudes in England 1500–1800*, London: Allen Lane, 1983; and Jan de Vries, *The industrious revolution: consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

convincingly demonstrated on the basis of rigorous comparative analysis, the United States.²⁵

Darwin's summaries in the introduction to *After Tamerlane* of some of the relevant thinking of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Adam Smith, Halford Mackinder, and others suggest that his narrative is going to be informed by a number of theoretical approaches. But Marx only reappears once in Darwin's global survey of five centuries of imperial expansionism, and Weber is not mentioned explicitly again, although his influence can be detected in much of what Darwin has to say about institutional and social change. Adam Smith is referenced at a number of points, and the very useful *Annales* concept of conjunctures is introduced at an appropriate point in Darwin's narrative. But there is no attempt to weave the ideas and perspectives of either the *Annalists* or Smith meaningfully into the sequence of global convergences or economic transformations that he seeks to link to imperial fortunes. The attention given at the outset to Mackinder's thesis regarding the continental, land-based mainsprings of great power dominance strikes one as contrary to much of the history that Darwin relates regarding the military underpinnings of the European and American empires. As his macro-narrative makes clear, sea power made Iberian expansionism possible and was critical to the success of the Dutch and British (and the ultimate failure of the French) world empires that followed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, supremacy of sea power remained essential for the maintenance of British world supremacy, and naval capacity provided the impetus for the rise of the United States as a great power and its eclipse of Great Britain as global hegemon. The failure of the Russians (in both the Tsarist and Soviet periods) and the Germans (under both the Kaiser and Hitler) to overtake the Anglo-Americans in empire-building owed much to their failure to match their rivals' mastery of sea warfare and maritime commerce. No wonder then that Mackinder, like Marx and Weber, all but disappears from Darwin's narrative.

25 George Fredrickson, *White supremacy: a comparative study in American and South African history*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, and *Black liberation: a comparative history of black ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

The paucity of theory that constricts the analytical resonance of *After Tamerlane* is also apparent in Darwin's failure to engage with other major works on the patterns of empire that have appeared in recent decades. Michael Doyle's *Empires*,²⁶ for example, is a highly conceptual and explicitly comparative exploration of the origins, composition, and modes of operation of empires over much of the course of human history. Doyle's detailed comparisons underscore the importance of both precision and historicist contextualization for determining workable general definitions and understanding the shifting meanings over time and across space of such key terms as empire and imperialism. While reading *After Tamerlane*, I also could not help but wonder how Darwin would square his often compelling, phase-specific arguments about the forces that lead to the rise of empires or cause them to decline and fall with the broader, less time-bound – yet more thorough and consistent – causal factors set forth by Paul Kennedy. But Darwin neither grapples with the similarities and differences between his and Kennedy's approaches nor deals directly with the question of whether or not it is possible to discern general patterns, much less 'laws', relating to the fate of empires. Both Darwin and Kennedy include in their calculus of why Western empires decline key factors such as inter-imperial rivalries, resistance on the part of the colonized, the propensity of great powers to overreach, and the financial burdens that each of these debilitating factors imposes. But Darwin's attention to these forces is episodic and diffuse, in contrast to Kennedy's view of them as necessary, but not sufficient, causes of decline.

In *The dynamics of global dominance: European overseas empires 1415–1980*,²⁷ David Abernethy covers roughly the same time span and imperial terrain as Darwin and Kennedy, but his work is far more systematically comparative and schematic. He also develops a much more explicit, consciously alternative time-frame and defines terms such as imperialism and empire at great length. Though both his phases and definitions are problematic in major ways, by engaging them Darwin might have been prompted to set out his own more clearly and analytically. Regarding the forces that undermine empires, Abernethy gives a good deal more weight to resistance and revolt on the part of subjugated peoples in all of the post-1415 phases of colonial

26 Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.

27 New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

expansion and retreat that he considers. Consequently, he provides more extended discussions of the colonizers' arrogant ideologies, social exclusivism, and misguided policies, and of the often intolerable conditions for the ruled that resulted. A fuller accounting in *After Tamerlane* of these dimensions of domination on both sides of the imperial divide would have made for a more balanced narrative and greater sense of the high costs of empires for those forced to endure their injustices and often excessive demands.

Lest the foregoing critique of *After Tamerlane* be interpreted as a call for an end to macro-narratives as an approach to world history, I wish to make it clear that this is not my intent. As Darwin amply demonstrates in his sprawling survey of the fate of empires over the last half millennium, the macro-narrative approach has the potential to engage an audience that extends well beyond the profession and the classroom in the quest to understand global historical forces and processes that have vitally shaped the contemporary world. The best of this genre, which would include *After Tamerlane*, capture the high drama of events and processes that have altered the human condition, and they enable us to engage in the ongoing debates that these transformations have generated, not only for scholars across several disciplines but for social commentators, polemicists, propagandists, and politicians. Thus, I believe that meta-narratives

have a good deal to recommend them. But, as I have sought to argue in dealing with some of the major issues relating to coverage, methodology, and broader applicability that *After Tamerlane* raises, world history narratives can be rendered more focused, manageable, and analytical by limiting – hence deepening – their cross-cultural coverage both spatially and temporally, and through the rigorous application of the comparative method. The combination of carefully chosen and fully contextualized case studies, reliance on both primary and secondary sources, clear and consistent analytic categories and variables, and explicit comparisons across cases provides global historians with the best tools that have yet been devised to achieve some of the vital tasks that Marc Bloch identified so astutely nearly a century ago.²⁸ And Bloch's estimate of the potential contributions that comparison might yield suggests that it is well suited to the purposes of global history: discerning critical questions, working out causal relationships and historical connections among and across cultures, exposing superficial or false analogies, tracing similarities and divergences among societies, and identifying patterns of change or continuity through time and space.

28 Bloch, 'A contribution towards a comparative history of European societies', originally published as 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes', *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, 46, 1928, pp. 15–50. The English

version, translated by Jelle C. Riemersma, was first published in Frederic C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma, eds., *Enterprise and secular change: readings in economic history*, Homewood, IL: R. D. Irwin, 1953, pp. 494–521.