

H-Net Reviews

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David Day. *Conquest: How Societies Overwhelm Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Illustrations. 288 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-993133-0.

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Supplanting the World Legally, Effectively, and Morally?

Imperialism and colonialism are enjoying a renaissance as topics for historical research, and David Day's *Conquest: How Societies Overwhelm Others* is a valuable addition to the historiography if used carefully. Unfortunately, its popular and populist approach render it susceptible to misuse, and thus it is best suited for graduate students who will not fall for its overly simple analogies. *Conquest* takes a sweeping global approach and has little time for nuances, and because of this choice, it is at times overly simplistic.

As is clear from the title, Day believes that imperialism and colonialism have little to recommend themselves. This is not new, as both his previous books, *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia and the Onset of the Pacific War, 1939-42* (1989) and *Reluctant Nation: Australia and the Allied Defeat of Japan, 1942-1945* (1993), were highly critical of imperialism and colonialism, often using them to excuse Australian domestic political failings—a trend the careful reader will again detect. He develops a new paradigm to explain the age of empires: namely, the ongoing supplantation of societies by others. Day argues that societies supplant other societies, and through numerous case studies, he shows that the supplantation of cultures is ongoing and constant. It is a valuable concept for future historians and one that is not weighed down by the political implications of conquest, imperialism, or colonialism. Successful supplantation requires a legal claim, effective occupation, and moral approval or legitimization. While the first two factors are familiar to imperial historians, the last is a new addition to

the historical tool box, and Day argues that it is the most important for effective supplantation. He demonstrates how successful conquerors have used the three in combination to ensure their successful supplantation of other societies. However, the argument about the failure of supplanting societies to effectively supplant the original society—especially when dealing with American immigration policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—is less than persuasive, as these are complex, ongoing problems, and Day has by no means mastered the primary or secondary literature.

Day attempts to prove his argument with a series of case studies. These are interesting in their own right, but they sometimes give the impression of an author attempting to shoehorn disparate events into his argument. There are also odd digressions into today's events that contribute little to the argument, such as a reference to tourists in Venice. The impression of an overly simplistic argument is heightened by the absence of any non-English sources in the bibliography; this is a serious omission in a work that deals in detail with the Holocaust, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Even the English-language sources are overly Australia-centric. Thus, one receives an Australian view of the world and an understanding of how Australian history fits into global history. While interesting, this does not make Day's argument any more convincing.

The absence of non-English sources is particularly

concerning, as Day believes “the genocidal imperative” is instinctive in the supplantation project. “Even a cursory examination of the history of the past millennia reveals that supplanting societies are driven by a ‘genocidal imperative,’ believing that only with the disappearance of the prior owners will they secure their claim on lands they intend to occupy for themselves” (p. 178). But the argument of the genocidal imperative, which will no doubt appeal to those of Day’s political persuasion—the work ends with a plea or perhaps prayer that we abolish nation-states as we have known them for centuries—is the work’s most contentious argument, but such an argument cannot be sustained without reference to non-English sources. Day strips the Holocaust of its historical uniqueness by placing it in the same league (albeit on a different level of magnitude) as the Armenian genocide, the American settlement of the West, and European settlement of his native Australia. The Trail of Tears and

the dispossession of Aboriginal Australians were horrendous, but it is too much of a stretch to place them in the same category as the Holocaust.

Day’s paradigm is interesting and useful, but it will take further research to assert its validity—research that is focused on one or two case studies and based on a thorough understanding of the literature and original sources in the original languages. That Day’s argument is too sweeping is not surprising: when one is setting forth a new paradigm one expects it to be challenged. It is unfortunate that Day set out his paradigm with so many questionable examples poorly supported by historical sources, as the more extreme examples will be the first to be challenged and probably disproven. However, a generation of historians will use Day’s paradigm to explore the case studies he has raised, and their work will refine the paradigm and improve our understanding of the topics that Day touches on.

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