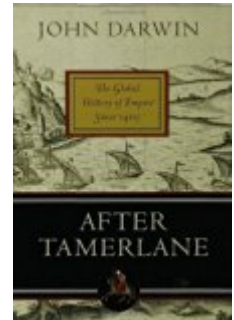


**John Darwin.** *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008. 575 pp. \$22.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59691-393-6.



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It is difficult to write any work of world history that focuses on the fifteenth century through the present without addressing empires or imperialism in some capacity. John Darwin's *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* concentrates squarely on empire. As the title suggests, Darwin identifies Tamerlane as a “transitional figure in Eurasian history” (p. 4). The collapse of Tamerlane’s empire after his death marked a turning point from the great land empires of Central Asia to the growth of seafaring European empires. Darwin focuses on the region of Eurasia in his study, consciously avoiding the characterization of Europe as distinct and exceptional from the rest of the world. Instead, by identifying Eurasia as the primary region of study, he succeeds in placing Europe on the same plane as Asia in terms of their standing in world history. He avoids the popular historical question of why Europe became wealthy and powerful and Asia struggled, and instead examines the concept of empire within the context of world history, viewing it as a broad human phenomenon as opposed

to, as is commonly believed, something distinctly European. He acknowledges that European imperialism does evoke strong ire, and explains that the key aspect of European empires, expropriation (both of resources and people), is what arouses such a negative response.

The book is structured into nine chapters, with the first, “Orientations” (an allusion to Edward Said), and the last, “Tamerlane’s Shadow,” providing the historiographical framework within which Darwin operates. The seven chapters between are structured chronologically, seeking to depict Eurasia as a whole during the given periods, beginning with the long sixteenth century (1480-1620) and ending with the period of World War II through the present day. Darwin attempts to maintain a balanced geographic perspective throughout the book and is successful in avoiding both Eurocentricism and the tendency to concentrate on one empire as a typical case study (such as the British Empire). He cites postcolonial scholarship as breaking down the belief that European imperialism was an inevitable march to progress

through modernity. An important dimension of Darwin's study is his insistence on the agency of the Eurasian peoples who came under the influence of the European empires. He asserts that, instead of European dominance, it is the resilience and persistence of these Eurasian peoples that was the prevailing story of the last several centuries. Additionally, Darwin's expansive work embraces the world historical approach of emphasizing connectedness, and each chapter concentrates on themes that extend beyond the boundaries of a single empire or nation-state.

The second chapter, "Eurasia and the Age of Discovery," examines Europe's maritime prospects in the long sixteenth century. Darwin depicts the emergence of exploratory voyages for the purposes of trade as important groundwork for later European imperial growth. The chapter traces this process, pioneered by the Portuguese, as beginning with the search for trade routes to India that circumvented the Middle East. However, the most important consequence of the Age of Discovery was the incorporation of the Americas into Eurasian commerce. Specifically, the extraction of silver from the Americas provided European empires crucial access to Asian trade and this period saw the development of important trade networks. However, the profound impacts of this period were not realized until much later, as this was only the very beginning of the globalizing processes that so heavily altered the balance of Eurasian power in the following centuries. One of the most compelling parts of Darwin's argument is his evaluation of the state of all of Eurasia after each chapter. At the end of his study of the long sixteenth century, Darwin concludes "there was little sign" that these advancements "had triggered the emergence of a world economy or weakened the cultural autonomy of old civilizations in other parts of Eurasia" (p. 98). This is a part of the broader project to move away from teleological models that presume the Age of Dis-

covery set Europe on an unalterable course toward its modern hegemonic position.

Whereas the Age of Discovery was not an era when European dominance could be safely predicted, Darwin identifies the period 1750 to 1830 as playing a much more significant role in securing Europe's position of power. In the chapter "The Eurasian Revolution," Darwin agrees with other assessments of this period that Europe's rise to economic and political power was driven by the integration of machine production that distanced it from other areas lacking industrial capabilities. The destruction of the antiquated mercantile economic system and British control of the sea routes to India, South East Asia, and China created new possibilities for European colonization and trade in those regions. Most importantly, "the era of 'free trade' was about to begin" (p. 211). Even at this point, where Darwin declares European dominance was at the stage of inevitability, he remains committed to the broader picture. He ends the chapter by highlighting the areas of Eurasia that had not yet come under full European control, including the unstable Ottoman Empire and its rebellious Egyptian offshoot. Most notable, however, was secluded Japan, which had enjoyed commercial prosperity despite agricultural limitations. Japan maintained its distance from Europe through the considerable buffer of China, which consistently drew more European attention.

Darwin acknowledges in his final chapter the tendency of world histories to subscribe to one of two rival grand narratives: exploitation or modernization. Neither of these narratives stands alone as a satisfactory explanation for world history and would be better understood as two forces acting within the political and cultural contexts of the states or regions considered. Instead of choosing a grand narrative, Darwin advocates for the identification of multiple "grand themes" that best give a glimpse into the "fate of Eurasia and thus the world" (p. 491). The first such theme highlighted in the final chapter is that of imperial

histories, significant because of Darwin's assessment of empire as world history's predominant political form. He cautions that there should not be exhaustive efforts to discriminate between European or Asian approaches to empire. The second theme is Eurasian persistence and resilience in the face of European colonization and imperial influence, while the third and final theme stresses the economic factors motivating imperial actions. Darwin argues it is these factors that create the material conditions in which imperial activity should be understood. He returns to the framework of globalization at the end of the book by asserting that contemporary globalization is a product of recent agreements by the four economic empires of the world: the United States, Europe, China, and Japan. He reflects back upon the legacy of "Tamerlane's shadow," which is that Eurasian resistance to the rule by a single system or individual is the one continuous theme of world history between 1405 and the present.

Darwin's thematic conception of world history is a successful departure from the grand narrative approach that has often dominated other works of similar scope. Despite utilizing a large geographic and temporal scale, Darwin's focus on Eurasia as the primary unit of analysis is cohesive and makes convincing claims about the development of the region as a whole as well as its global implications. *After Tamerlane* is worthwhile not only as an alternative to the grand narrative but also for its content specific to Eurasian history and the study of empire. Closely aligning with several core objectives of the world history field (such as emphasizing connections and avoiding the nation-state as the unit of analysis), Darwin's "global history of empire" makes a compelling case for the centrality of empire in world history and offers a model for writing world history within a multithematic framework.

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