

Fibiger Bang, Peter; Bayly, C. A.: *Tributary Empires in Global History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. ISBN: 9780230294721; 294 S.

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When accomplished scholars produce essays for a conference or intellectual project the collective result is rarely as coherent, stimulating or influential as research they have individually published in monographs or as essays. Herding cats might be easier than coercing scholars to address a single theme, idea or model, and unless editors are able to assume dictatorial powers, joint volumes tend to contain disparate contributions, which are fated to have little long-term influence. Such is the case with the present volume, containing essays on historiography, sociological theory and historical comparison of what the book's editors term „tributary empires,“ that is empires whose prosperity and power were derived from taxation of agrarian resources.

Two fundamental problems vitiate the significance of a volume, which contains some fine individual essays. First, agrarian empires constitutes a vast and unwieldy subject and the editors and contributors do not seem to have agreed to limit the possible subjects under this rubric to a manageable number, which might then be addressed by each essayist. Second, although comparative history is a major focus or theme of this volume, no attempt has been made to seriously address what comparison means or what it might produce, apart from a brief mention of diachronic or synchronic analysis. Marc Bloch once described comparison as the „dialectic“ of historical analysis, by which he alluded to the inductive reasoning process, which his teacher, Emilé Durkheim knew from his study of Aristotelian logic, could produce generalizations that represented real knowledge. Bloch himself wrote an essay on comparative history that could be a starting point for discussion of comparative history.

Having said this, the three essays on historiography, which constitute Part I of this volume by Christopher Bayly, Fabrizio De Donno and Baki Tezcan, are each in their own way articulate discussions of historical

writing on the British, Italian and Ottoman empires. The first two particularly resonate with one another as they involve discussion of British authors and both British and Italian ruminations on the Roman and British empires. Baki Tezcan's essay on Ahmed Cevdet stands alone, but represents a persuasive analysis of a later Ottoman scholar coming to terms with fundamental changes in the structure of the Ottoman state. None of the authors offer comparative observations about imperial historiography, perhaps because it is so obvious that historians reflect their times as much as poets and novelists. On their own terms, these essays are three of the most satisfying in the volume.

Part II: „Theoretical Perspectives on Empire,“ contains five essays of varying quality. Two of them, W. G. Runciman's „Empire as a Topic in Comparative Sociology“ and Andre Wink's „Post-Nomadic Empires: From the Mongols to the Mughals,“ offer little to the students of tributary states. In his essay, Runicman introduces readers to the use of „neo-Darwinian sociological theory,“ which he has outlined in a recent volume on cultural selection. Yet, it is so brief and tentative, as to be virtually useless, and his concluding remark that empires, or in his terms „convenient states“ „cannot but be difficult to sustain for reasons which lie deep in the past evolution of the human species as such“ is frustratingly enigmatic. Wink's essay, while making the legitimate point about the difficulty, or impossibility of establishing nomadic states in India, makes both dubious and erroneous comments about Muslim empires in the subcontinent. Thus, in the course of discussing the first Turkic empires, presumably alluding to the Ghaznavids and Ghurids, he writes that these states were „Arguably... the first *real* empires in India,“ without considering the Mauryas, Guptas, Cholas and others. If this statement is questionable, then his identification of the Mughals as nomadic Mongols is simply wrong. The Mughals were Turks, that is Timurids, who had long been sedentarized, and while they employed true Mongol contingents in their armies, the entire ethos of the early Mughal state of 1526, as the empire's founder, Babur makes clear in his remarkable autobiography, was agrarian and sedentary, if

you will, „civilized.“

Essays by Michal Tymowski, David Ludden and Giovanni Salmeri in Part II are far more satisfactory and make useful points. Tymowski particularly offers an important summary of the idiosyncratic characteristics of pre-European African empires, while Ludden provides piquant data about two „frontier“ districts in South India and generalizes plausibly about the nature of empire, based upon information derived from both Mughal and British imperial rule in these two areas. Salmeri, as the title of his article clearly indicates, provides a well-documented capsule history of Sicily from Roman times to the eighteenth century, and it could be seen by attentive readers to implicitly involve some of the questions of center and periphery that Ludden addresses in his discussion about the two South Indian districts. However, neither these two authors nor any of the others in Part II engage their fellow contributors in a comparative discussion.

Finally, in Part III, five authors have each written essays comparing two empires. Peter Fibiger Bang compares the universal claims of Roman and Mughal emperors, Walter Scheidel, discusses the „First Great Divergence“ between Eastern and Western Eurasia, Chris Wickham contrasts the state structures of the late Roman Empire and the Arab or Umayyad Caliphate and Stephen Blake analyses the similarities and differences of court ceremonials in the three so-called „early modern“ Muslim empires. Finally, in one of the most extensive essays in the volume, Karen Barkey and Rudi Batzell compare the social structure of the Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg empires.

Bang's essay is predictably strong on Roman history but based on only a few Mughal materials and thus his comparison has limited value. Scheidel's contribution is a rarity in this volume as he explicitly discusses the material of another contributor, Chris Wickham, but his essay is as lopsided as Bang's, with most of the essay devoted to pre-Tang China, with only the briefest allusions to the Roman empire and Europe. Wickham, in contrast, does discuss both Late Rome and the Umayyad Caliphate, and not only raises questions about the general problems of comparison but identifies some useful similarities and

differences in these two empires. Unfortunately his essay is so brief, in his words „a think piece,“ it does not take readers very far. Blake's contribution is one of the most satisfying in the volume, as it deals with a limited subject, court ceremonial in three Muslim empires, the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal he has previously studied and which he discusses with easy authority. Finally Barkey and Batzell, respectively Ottoman and European historians, provide the most substantial essay in Part III, as they have the knowledge both to make substantial comparisons among these three empires during the seventeenth century, the focus of their piece, and also to offer three „sociological conclusions“ about them. These conclusions are not startlingly radical or surprising, but they are based upon a balanced, careful assessment of the empires in this period.

In conclusion then this volume, like so many other collections of essays, is more elegant in the conception than the execution. Many of the distinguished contributors offer cogent observations, but taken as a whole the collection does not represent a signal contribution to the study of empires, tributary or otherwise. Nearly all of the individual authors have published more important work elsewhere, and readers interested in their scholarship ought to look to these articles or volumes for their insights into empires or methodological issues.

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