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Professor Sir Richard Evans has written an impressive, lively, and highly readable account of Europe between the Napoleonic wars and the First World War. It begins with a striking vignette of a German soldier conscripted into Napoleon’s Grande Armée: indeed each chapter begins with an extended presentation of one personality that Evans wants to rescue from historical obscurity. That is a good way of making the point that individuals and their emotions and experiences matter in history, and that historians should not simply be concerned with vast and abstract immaterial forces. The book ends with the well-known line of the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, looking out over Whitehall in August 1914 and concluding that the lamps are going out all over Europe: “We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.” Europe’s transformative nineteenth century began and ended with indescribable but also transformative violence. Evans explores and describes a world in between those traumas.

The book is staggeringly wide-ranging, geographically and thematically. No corner of Europe is unmentioned. There are intriguing discussions of the importance of headwear (hats as a sign of respectability) and of the different beard- and moustache-wearing proclivities across European countries. At the outset, Evans’s account treats Europe basically as a whole, ranging freely across the continent with wonderful illustrative examples of peasant and rural life and manners. That is logical, in that although there is immense social and economic diversity (and very different forms of political authority) across Europe, those differences don’t fit neatly into national units that historians have often used as the basis of analysis. For instance, the project of a specifically German social history as espoused by Hans-Ulrich Wehler is quite problematical, as the southwest has much more in common with mountain areas in France and Switzerland than with the latifundia of East Elbia, which in turn are more like the big estates of parts of the Russian or the Habsburg empire. In contrast, Evans’s willingness to cross frontiers to bring out commonalities and differences is a great advance. By the later stages of the book, there is more of a focus, rightly, on national politics, with extended sections of political narrative on the „Great Powers,” Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Habsburg Empire, Russia and Turkey. Part of the story of the pursuit of power in modern Europe is clearly the rise of the modern state – with rising expenditure, above all on the military, but also increasingly on welfare measures. The economist Adolph Wagner propounded his famous law of increasing state activities, and Max Weber thought in terms of the iron cage of rationality. A very convincing section of the books deals with the ambiguities in the face of a modern state of the still very large rural world (except in Britain, where agricultural employment had dwindled).

The nineteenth century was the period when Europe imposed its rule on much of the world. The imperialism of the age was quite different to that of the early modern colonial empires, and much of the British and French empires of the eighteenth centuries collapsed. There is a surprising, striking, original, and even superficially persuasive answer that Evans gives to the question of how Europe could triumph in this way. Traditionally, Europeans have described this in terms of their superiority. Evans begins his account by taking Niall Ferguson to task for believing in a European “intrinsic superiority” (rather unfairly: Ferguson’s account is about the way in which particular European legal institutions generate a social and economic dynamic, and reflects a modern social science consensus as exemplified for instance by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson). Sometimes, in an earlier age, that superiority was supposed to be moral: British imperialism often rested on a Christian missionary basis, and France wanted to export „uplift” based on the ideals of the French Revolution. These versions of moral superiority were almost always tinged with belief about racial superiority. Evans in his chapter heading quotes Rudyard Kipling on the White Man’s Burden, as the United
States began to embark on its version of imperialism after the Spanish-American War. A more recent interpretation, supported by a great deal of evidence, is that it was a particular European (and North American) economic dynamic, perhaps best described as capitalism, that drove Europe’s pursuit of world power. Many trace the trajectory of this interpretation back to Karl Marx, who included a famous paean to the transformative power of capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto*. Evans is not very sympathetic to that sort (or any other sort) of economic determinism, and begins his chapter on empires and imperialism rather oddly by detailed (or thick) descriptions of explorers and the European passion for opening up dangerous and remote locations as a manifestation of simple curiosity, and a desire in plundering curiosities. The human-scale introduction to that chapter begins with a depiction of a powerfully built circus strongman, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, who ended up stealing Egyptian papyri, obelisks, and other curiosities. That was not so much organized capitalism as casual looting. For Evans, however, it is not just superiority (in any form) or curiosity that drives the European empires.

Evans’s answer in explaining Europe’s global reach and power is quite different. “Far from being inevitable after 1500, as some historians have claimed, this global imbalance did not really take hold until the third quarter of the nineteenth century. It was the product not just of technological superiority but also of European peace. Things might have been very different had the European nations carried on fighting each other and exporting their conflicts to other parts of the globe, as they had done before 1815.” (pp. 653–654) This is a really bold formulation, and is sure to provoke controversy. It is in fact strikingly similar to Norman Angell’s famous argument in *The Great Illusion*, originally published as *Europe’s Optical Illusion* in 1909, which made the point about capitalism and economic interdependence breeding peace, and in which the last section of the book argued that what might be thought of as the peace revolution was particularly British or even English: “the practical genius of the English race fits them to lead the way in this as in the religious reformation.” It is true that the nineteenth century was relatively peaceful, and that the mobilization of the Napoleonic period was not repeated in Europe until the twentieth century. But the age of imperialism was touched off by the most violent episodes of Europe’s nineteenth century history: the Crimean War, which persuaded the Russian government that it needed to modernize; the US Civil War; and the wars of Italian and German unification, culminating in the Franco-Prussian war, which created a united German Empire and also allowed Italian troops to seize the Papal States and complete Italy’s unification. And after that, imperialism was precisely about exporting conflicts to other parts of the world, in the race for Africa, or the positioning of the European great powers (and of Japan) to carve up a fragile and disintegrating Chinese empire.

Evans is also describing a world in which for a long time Britain was absolutely dominant: “Throughout the nineteenth century, the economy of Europe and indeed the whole world was dominated by Britain.” (p. 292). He provides many neat embodiments of this British superiority, as German entrepreneurs such as Alfred Krupp (his first name an apparent testimony of Anglophilia) toured British iron and steel works in disguise to learn and steal technical secrets. “In 1841 only one of fifty-one locomotives used in Prussia was not British, and it did not work.” (p. 153) In some ways, what is presented in these pages is a very British view of the world, rather as Angell’s had been. But it was a world view that was increasingly challenged by the end of the nineteenth century, in a movement that Norman Stone in his powerful *Europe Transformed* liked to describe as “the strange death of liberal Europe.”

Something of the Anglo-centric view pervades the book, with Britain as a consistent model or exemplar. Sometimes Evans even slips into statements that imply that Britain was not in Europe: “The most important centre of the new textile production in Europe was in northern France and southern Belgium.” (p. 136). And foreign (non-British) countries are easily caricatured by over-simple descriptions. “Some sought to free their own nation from a foreign yoke.
Most persistent were the Poles.” (p. 178) Might there not be equivalent Irish, Hungarian, Romanian accounts? What was simply persistent about the Polish and Irish demands was that they were not met in the pre-1914 order. It’s not clear how far the demand for national autonomy and independence is really measurable; and how it might also have been good to make the point at the heart of Chris Bayly’s magisterial nineteenth century global history, that opposition to empire was most effective when it was founded on religious belief (as in Poland or Ireland, but also in Abyssinian resistance to Italian imperialism).

Pervaded by a deep understanding of British and German thinking, the book is relatively weak on France, and on the drama of 1870/71, when French power was destroyed and the balance in Europe profoundly affected. France – and the United States – could also serve as exemplars of a rather different kind of polity to that of Great Britain. It is striking that while there is a great deal of discussion about Britain and Germany in Africa, there is comparatively little on the French empire with the exception of Algeria, and the French push into Indochina is left unexplored. There is no explanation of why, if the British example in railroads was so dominant, the words of the railroad in nineteenth century Germany (and elsewhere in central and eastern Europe) were all French: you bought a billet, had it punched by a conducteur, after boarding the wagon from the perron. (The modern German words Fahrkarte, Schaffner and Bahnsteig were only imported in the Nazi era as part of a deliberate nationalization of the German language).

There is also strangely little on the most obvious way that contemporaries believed Britain controlled the world: not just through textile and coal exports but through financial dominance. In 1873, in the immediate aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, Walter Bagehot began his classic work on London as a financial center, Lombard Street (1873), with the statement that London represented „the greatest combination of economic power and economic delicacy that the world has ever seen.” But this was a striking recent development.” As Marc Flandreau and other have shown, up to 1870, France was in many ways Britain’s equal as a financial center. The question of the financial networks that linked the world, and the way in which they could be weaponized, became increasingly acute in the early years of the twentieth century.

Great Britain had a naval preponderance, and was also the world’s financial superpower. The idea of the novel British strategy at the beginning of the twentieth century was to link both these elements of hegemony: Britain effectively controlled the infrastructure of the world commercial system as well as having supremacy of the seas. Not only was a large part of the world’s commercial shipping in British hands; Britain also controlled the insurance business; and most trade – even for products produced and bought by third parties – was financed through bills drawn on the City of London, accepted by London acceptance houses (mostly merchant banks), using the financial resources of the giant new commercial banks (so-called clearing banks). The cables that transmitted the information about commercial transactions were also British. Britain could thus control the nerve centers of the international order. In one influential interpretation, as popularized by Angell, the interdependency of the increasingly complex global economy made war impossible. But a quite opposite conclusion was possible and equally plausible, that a clever twist to the control levers might make war easily winnable by the economic hegemon. That logic behind British thinking was set out in a remarkable book by Nicholas Lambert published in 2012, Planning Armageddon. British Economic Warfare and the First World War.

The discussion of financial networks points the direction for Evan’s answer to another famous historiographical controversy. 1914 stands as a shadow over this whole period; the First World War is what the great diplomat and foreign policy thinker George Kennan referred to as „the great seminal catastrophe” or Urkatastrophe. Was it the result of a deep structural logic generated by imperialism, or by economic growth, and an increasing nationalist backlash against the liberal world, or by some other mechanism linking democracy and popular politics to the international
power game? Evans ends the book with a very striking depiction of the high levels of mobilization (and the atrocities) of the Balkan wars that preceded 1914, and sees them (convincingly) as the precursor of the Great War. That point is more and more widely appreciated in the wake of Christopher Clark’s superb *Sleepwalkers*. Evans concludes that there was a „complex chain of events“ that led to war in the summer of 1914, but that „the statesmen who took these fateful decisions had not been carried into conflict by a wave of popular enthusiasm.“ (p. 714) But it would have been good to explicate the logic that led them on a fatal path dependency. At the end of the book, Evans states that „Europe’s slow and uneven march towards democracy was reversed after the First World War.“ (p. 715) Weren’t the problems and tensions of democracy – ones that are very evident in contemporary Europe – also quite visible as the faultlines of a power-seeking Europe in the years before 1914?