

When companies were kings

New perspectives on imperial history

DAVID ARMITAGE

OUTSOURCING EMPIRE

How company-states made the modern world
ANDREW PHILLIPS AND J. C. SHARMAN
253pp. Princeton University Press. £25 (US
\$29.95).

WAVES ACROSS THE SOUTH

A new history of revolution and empire
SUJIT SIVASUNDARAM
468pp. William Collins. £25.

IF YOU WERE BOOK-BROWSING around 1790 and picked up a recent “view of modern times”, you might hope to learn something about revolution. And so you would have done, just not the revolution we would expect to learn about now. The hefty book in your hands would have been the *S’ir Mutaqherin; or view of modern times*, a history of India between 1707 and 1783 published in Calcutta and translated into English from the Persian. Its author, Ghulām Husain Khān Tabatābā’ī, was a minor Mughal aristocrat who had worked for the English East India

Company. He had witnessed the British and Dutch contending in his native Bihar, and understood their conflicts within global patterns of commercial competition and political instability: “The dissensions between the two nations arose from this event: the king of the English maintained these five or six years past, a contest with the people of America ... on account of the [East India] Company’s concerns”. He explained what the Company was, that it held the English king in its thrall and how it dominated the “council of the nation” (Parliament), leading ultimately to the American Revolution. Viewed from Patna in the 1780s, “modern times” were an epoch of predatory corporations lordling it over other sovereigns and sparking revolution (*inqilab*) from South Asia to North America.

Ghulām Husain Khān’s startling account unsettles two of the least questioned contemporary orthodoxies about modern times: that states are its primary political actors and that the Atlantic world was the matrix of revolutionary modernity. An entire discipline, International Relations, rests on the first assumption; modern historians have long preached the second. To question such bedrock premisses from within their respective academic domains requires intellectual independence, great learning and no little courage. Armed with these qualities, Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman in *International*

“

The Hudson’s Bay Company once controlled a twelfth of the Earth’s land surface but is now a Canadian department store chain

Relations and the historian Sujit Sivasundaram face down their disciplinary dragons to provide striking counter-narratives - Phillips and Sharman about the making of international order, Sivasundaram about the genesis of modern politics. In light of their arguments, neither *International Relations* nor modern history will look quite the same again.

Outsourcing Empire is the more conventionally unconventional of the two books. It takes for granted the existence of an international system populated by actors exercising sovereignty through governing territory, making treaties and waging war. But if the stage and even the plot sound familiar, the cast of characters is not. Phillips and Sharman turn the spotlight away from states, and onto those “states in disguise of a merchant”, in Edmund Burke’s dismissive phrase, that combined the economic imperatives of trading corporations with the sovereign capacities more recently associated exclusively with states. They argue that these “company-states” - the term is the historian Philip Stern’s - were the “primary mediators linking Europe with the rest of the world” for centuries, due to their “chameleon-like ability to adapt to local circumstances”. Most of these creatures, from the Dutch East India Company to the Royal Niger Company, are now extinct. Yet some of these hybrids remain, albeit in diminished forms. The Hudson’s Bay Company once controlled a twelfth of the Earth’s land surface but is now a Canadian department store chain. The East India Company dominated the South Asian subcontinent for a century: today, it sells high-end comestibles to tourists probably unaware of its rapacious reputation. Company-states may now be history but they left a “long buried company-state stratum of the global international order” for political archaeologists to excavate.

The thesis of *Outsourcing Empire* will be more novel to political scientists than to those historians who have recently studied company-states as simultaneous agents of imperialism and capitalism, especially in the Indian Ocean. Phillips and Sharman’s achievement is to pull together myriad literatures over three centuries and most of the globe, to find patterns only a synthetic treatment can reveal. They show, more clearly than any historian has done, how these “syncretic Frankenstein monsters” rose from the early seventeenth century to their zenith in the 1750s. They then fell before briefly reviving in the 1880s, more like Dracula than Frankenstein’s creature. The company-state proved most successful in South Asia and became handy once more in the European “scramble” for Africa and the competition for colonies in the Pacific; they proved less effective in the Atlantic world, save for the Hudson’s Bay Company, and when they conducted intra-European trade they ditched most of their state-like powers.

Because they were flexible, risk-bearing and had more diplomatic deniability than conventional states, company-states were useful scapegoats as much as nimble proxies. As legal persons seeking profit, founded on a joint stock and with limited liability, they could help European saltwater empires cheaply conquer the tyranny of distance between, say, Amsterdam and Jakarta or London and Kolkata. In this regard, Elon Musk’s SpaceX may be a closer living descendant than a private military contractor like Blackwater. Yet, overstretched and widely criticized for corruption and rapine, company-states lost legitimacy before their final cynical revival in late nineteenth-century Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa. By then, they had stamped their mark on territories from Alaska (once the Russian-American Company’s) to Zimbabwe (out from under the British South Africa Company), even if their legacy has been largely forgotten.

Lucid, sweeping and economical, *Outsourcing Empire* disturbs lazy ideas about the endurance of what the authors call a “universal sovereign-state monoculture” since the seventeenth century, and it persuasively integrates the rise of commercial capitalism with the making of modern international society. Yet it leaves some urgent questions undressed. Are private corporations that aim to deliver



“Hudson’s Bay Company Ships” by Robert Hood, 1819

public goods doomed to corruption and collapse? Should any corporation now be tasked with, say, promoting human rights? And how did we come to believe that only companies should seek profit, not states? Nor does it attempt to open the black box of the company-state: the reader learns little of the corporations’ internal workings, and individuals are scarce throughout. Most tellingly, “in a world where companies were once kings”, their subjects rarely appear. To be sure, company-states were exclusively European creations, but how did the millions of non-Europeans under their often ruthlessly extractive rule interact with and resist them? *Outsourcing Empire* may be on the leading edge of International Relations, but by omitting its victims’ perspectives and only seeing like a company-state, it lags behind the most innovative current writing in global history.

Waves Across the South, by contrast, exemplifies the very best of that work. Sujit Sivasundaram confidently surfs a dynamic wave of scholarship that has transformed the histories of the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific by looking from below - through the eyes of Indigenous peoples, the enslaved, the subjected and the global South, instead of those of the colonizers, the enslavers, the dominant or the global North. His aim is nothing less than “to turn the story of the dawn of our times inside out”, by locating the birth of the modern world in the great Indo-Pacific arc from the Persian Gulf to Polynesia, by way of the Cape Colony, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Burma, Java and Tasmania. To call this ambitious would be an understatement. Not since R. R. Palmer’s *Age of the Democratic Revolution* (1959) has any historian moulded such a vast array of actors and events into a cogent vision of the Age of Revolutions. Only C. A. Bayly’s *Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (2004) compares in global scope and dizzying range of reference. Sivasundaram explicitly rejects - indeed, entirely inverts - Palmer’s thesis that modern revolution spread from West to East and from North to South. Moreover, he fills the Pacific-sized void Bayly notoriously left in his magisterial work. And by recasting empire - especially the British empire - as the countervailing force in this turbulent arena, he brilliantly restores counter-revolution to its proper place in the Age of Revolutions.

The half-century from the 1790s to the 1840s now appears as a period of novel possibilities for “Pacific Islander, Māori, Aboriginal Australian, Arab, Qasimi, Omani, Parsi, Javanese, Burmese, Chinese, Indian, Sinhalese, Tamil, Malay, Mauritian, Malagasy and Khoisan” peoples. They were sometimes swamped by the first waves of globalization rippling outwards from mainland Asia and from Europe. As Sivasundaram shows in compelling detail, they traversed new shores and entered novel alliances, as they built ships, opened markets, hunted megafauna, promoted millenarianism and even adopted symbols of revolution drifting in from the North: republican clubs and declarations of independence, French-style cockades and self-images as “little Napoleons”. Yet empire also came from the sea, crushing indigenous aspirations and harnessing vibrant circuits for its own ends: “The British empire co-opted the

dreams of the global South and sent these dreams into reverse gear”.

Waves function as both matter and metaphor in Sivasundaram’s richly layered narrative. Materially, they operate as vectors of connection and collision between the peoples of the sea from within and outside the “watery geography” of the Indo-Pacific. They also provide a novel view of the land seen from the water and of history viewed over the seas. For example, from this vantage point, the land-bound “Military Revolution”, a grand concept beloved of Eurocentric historians, appears as a fundamentally naval movement in the early nineteenth century. A largely forgotten event like the costly first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-6), in which British forces deployed a steamship in battle against Burmese teak war-boats, comes into focus as a clash of cosmology as well as technology. Sivasundaram stresses the resurgence of Buddhist kingship and its collision with British efforts to assert maritime dominance in the region: each shaped, and was shaped in turn, by the other vibrant force. By looking from two optics, Burmese and British, Sivasundaram argues that British dominance was not inevitable, as Victorian chroniclers were to portray it. Instead, it was wave-like: non-linear, unpredictable and formed from colliding energies over vast expanses. Metaphorically, then, waves represent the back and forth of contestatory politics on a hemispheric scale. Just as “waves do not stop”, Sivasundaram writes, “revolution, empire and counter-revolt were part of a sequence of politics” that rolls on to this day.

Sivasundaram’s subtle argument never quite specifies exactly what features of the modern first emerged from the Indo-Pacific world. For Palmer, the crucial link between the Age of Revolutions and his own time was “democracy”, understood as a Tocquevillian teleology of ever-expanding equality. More recently for Bayly, the “World Crisis” of the period accelerated diversification within cultures in tandem with greater uniformity among them: a similar “push and pull of dynamic of globalisation” informs *Waves Across the South*. Sivasundaram’s history is resolutely non-teleological: for him, the counter-revolutionary machinery of empire foreshadows the future as much as any liberatory, let alone democratic, energy. Most importantly, his work stresses how peoples from the Arabian Peninsula to Oceania not only made their own history but still make it, and in doing so have remade the world’s history, too.

Most social scientists prize parsimony, while historians revel in profusion. Phillips and Sharman make up in theoretical ambition what they lack in empathetic detail, while Sivasundaram’s cornucopian voices, incidents and characters resist being shoehorned into an abstract argument. The historical worlds they depict resemble the two cities of China Miéville’s future-fictional detective novel, *The City and the City* (2009) in that they overlap but hardly intersect, as if in different dimensions but within the same space. The East India Company appears in *Waves Across the South*, of course, just as the Indian Ocean bulks large in *Outsourcing Empire*, but in general their forms of argument, selection of agents and even their conceptions of politics mark them as

disciplinarily distinct. Now freed from the myths of a “Westphalian” world of states born in 1648 and of ever-expanding “democracy” flowing outwards, and southwards, from the Atlantic Age of Revolutions, we might imagine ways to integrate their approaches and their findings. From the Cape Colony to Sāmoa, company-states made waves across the South, while Indigenous polities countered capitalism and colonialism at each stage of their entangled life cycles. That would be a view of modern times familiar to Ghulām Husain Khān, over two centuries ago. ■

ŒUVRES COMPLÈTES DE
VOLTAIRE

Volume 145

*Notes et écrits
marginaux conservés
hors de la Bibliothèque
nationale de Russie*

Critical edition by Gillian Pink et al.

MLA 2020 PRIZE FOR
COLLABORATIVE,
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL, OR
ARCHIVAL SCHOLARSHIP
Honourable mention

“The complete critical edition of Voltaire’s works is a remarkable achievement, and this individual volume is a particular accomplishment, collecting marginalia from books owned and read by Voltaire that did not end up in St Petersburg following Catherine II’s purchase of his library after his death. Voltaire covered his books in notes and comments, often arguing with his opponents in the margins of their texts. But these marginalia can also show him to be a measured and open reader. Wonderfully and clearly edited, this erudite volume will serve scholars for generations to come.”

MLA citation

ISBN 978-0-7294-0890-5
tinyurl.com/y8n7u4oo

COMPLETING THIS YEAR
*Œuvres complètes
de Voltaire*
203 volumes

Begun in 1968, the final volumes of this definitive edition of Voltaire’s works will be published this year.

ISBN 978-0-7294-1236-0
tinyurl.com/ydy7ryof

www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk



David Armitage is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History at Harvard University. He is the author of *Civil Wars: A history in ideas, 2017*, and co-editor, with Stella Ghervas, of *A Cultural History of Peace in the Age of Enlightenment, 2020*

© GRANGER HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/ALAMY