

The Eagle and the Dragon: Globalization and European Dreams of Conquest in China and America in the Sixteenth Century

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Reviewer: Felipe Fernandez-Armesto

Serge Gruzinski compares Cortés's actions in Mexico with suggestions for the invasion of China, adumbrated by Portuguese captives in Canton in 1522–3. Though he includes perfunctory narratives of both episodes, his approach is analytical, as he looks at Iberian preconceptions and perceptions of the regions in question, the participants' self-perceptions or self-representations (and, sketchily, at how their hosts or foes saw them), and the reasons for the contrasting fortunes of the protagonists in the two locations. Throughout, he juggles with two balls, as it were, giving rather more air to Mexico than China. He adds a long colophon on Spanish proposals to attempt to conquer China in the late 16th century.

The comparison between remote, rich destinations is interesting and suggestive. On rational calculations, Iberian adventurers could not be expected to dictate policy in regions so populous, powerful, rich, and remote from the intruders' sources of reinforcement and supply. So the question of why they succeeded in one arena and not the other can spark potentially lively reflections and raise big problems of whether a globally minded historian can attain a level of analysis high enough to generalise lucidly, without losing sight of regional and local contingencies. Gruzinski cannot be said to have exploited the opportunity effectively.

In the first place, he never explains why he excludes many other similar conquests and projected conquests. In the period he covers, Iberians replaced or integrated incumbent elites in many parts of the Americas, Africa, and on the fringes of Asia. With less success, they projected or attempted the conquest or coercion of realms in other parts of the New World and in – to name only a few examples – Cambodia, Mwene Mutapa, Morocco, Benin, and patches of territory in and along the Persian Gulf.

In any case, for all Gruzinski's dexterity, the elements of the comparison he does attempt seem mismatched: a real conquest on the one hand, ineffective arguments for an attempted invasion on the other. There are possibilities, which the author ignores, for a more searching comparison into the thinking of obsessive fantasists far from home, obsessed by the fear of failure in unfamiliar and largely unintelligible environments, and escaping into imaginary futures. In China Vasco Calvo and Cristovão Vieira were not adumbrating practical plans, but romanticizing in response to their capture. Cortés in Mexico, despite his

claims to control the process, made few effective plans of his own, but responded, in ill-concealed anxiety, to the initiatives of native allies and enemies. The Portuguese, Gruzinski tell us in a sonorous phrase, were 'longing for revenge and tormented by their impotence' (p. 166). He might have said the same of the Spaniards for much of the time, too.

His central question is, 'How are we to explain such contrary fates?' (p. 105) as those of the Portuguese emissaries executed in China and of the Spanish conquistadores triumphant in Mexico. Gruzinski has some difficulty in facing the temptation to invoke false comparisons. He says, for instance, that his protagonists 'had to face the same challenges' (p. 159) in China and Mexico – an overstatement belied by many differences of scale, culture, environment, and technology, some of which the author enumerates at intervals. In expounding another unconvincing parallel, he justifies his suggestion that 'fortune' decided the contrasting outcomes in both his chosen theatres of action on the grounds that 'fortune' covers 'circumstances, fate, and chance' (p. 159). 'Circumstances' can mean anything, and fate and chance are maladies beyond historians' practice.

A good deal of the book focuses on one half of his central question: the hoary old problem of how Spaniards became dominant in 16th-century Mexico, despite their apparent disqualifications as poor, few, and weak outsiders. Gruzinski's response is disappointingly conventional. Superior Spanish 'technical, psychological, and intellectual strength' (p. 9) were decisive. 'Error' and insufficient 'grasp ... caught' the Aztecs 'unawares' (p. 173). 'An avalanche of ... prodigies' (p. 28) foredoomed them. Their sense of history was 'hopelessly confused. This was a way of thinking ill equipped to confront the unexpected' (p. 14). The author seems unaware of the work of other scholars who have vindicated Aztec rationality, sagacity, agency, and initiative. He lets the 'familiar refrain of the invincible technical superiority of the Europeans' (p. 128) go unchallenged. Guns and horses rumble and whinny ominously, even though Gruzinski is aware that guns caused 'more fear than damage' (p. 164), and that Cortés had only a handful of such weapons.

It is hard to resist the impression that in other respects the author's long accumulated attainments in the study of the conquest of Mexico have atrophied. He does not refer, for instance, to work on the suppositious nature of the omen-stories, which are traceable to European sources but not to uncorrupted indigenous ones. He proclaims, 'I have rejected Eurocentrism ... for sound intellectual reasons' (p. 239), but to portray indigenous people as outwitted, clueless, inflexible, inferior, superstitious, inhibited, and bereft of initiative is to repeat Eurocentric myths. The real Aztecs were, for the most part, as far as we know, dynamic, aggressive, self-confident, strategically alert, and adaptable, with an inspiring record of success. They lost their hegemony to superior numbers of other natives, not to white gods.

Nor does Gruzinski make the most of the comparison with China to illuminate the problem of why Spaniards, rather than native aspirants, replaced the Aztecs as the regional hegemon. He realizes that the Chinese were intractable to deal with, because they started – rather like some of the opponents of immigration today in Gruzinski's French homeland and other parts of the West – with contempt for barbarians and aliens. Gruzinski does not notice that in many cultures, including those of Mesoamerica in the 16th century, what we might call the stranger-effect is positive: the stranger arrives, endowed with the appeal of the exotic, the objectivity of the outsider, the marriageability of the exogamous, and the aura of the divine horizon. Spaniards succeeded, not because of the Machiavellian 'virtú' Gruzinski ascribes to them (p. 160), but because indigenous cultures welcomed and empowered them.

None of these deficiencies would altogether undermine confidence in the author, were it not for his failing grasp of the background to and even the proper content of his stories in both his chosen regions. It is disarming to hear that 'the ancient Mexicans had no writing' (except by selective definitions of ancient, Mexican, and writing) (p. 9), or that 'the Chinese empire dated back to the third millennium before the Christian era' (p. 9), or that the Aztecs' was a 'tranquil world' until Spaniards disturbed it (p. 13), or that Tenochtitlan had '200,000 to 300,000 inhabitants' (p. 14), or that 'the treaty of Tordesillas divided the world into two equal halves' (p. 32), or that Cortés and some of his contemporaries 'were probably the first Europeans to think politics [sic] outside the Christian-Muslim world' (p. 158) or that the siege in which

Cortés's men took part reduced Tenochtitlan to 'a pile of rubble', or that the 'extermination' or 'exodus' of its inhabitants ensued (p. 173). Gruzinski's explanations of the origin of the Chinese name for the Portuguese (which he usually transliterates as 'Folang-ki') are various and confused: really, it was a Sinicized version of the crusade-old Arabic name for Franks. The author repeatedly asserts the standard (and plausible but unproven) view that Mexican silver ultimately enriched China, without taking into account the modifications suggested by the research of E. van Veen. His habit of imagining what his protagonists 'must have' or 'would have' done, thought, or said (pp. 51, 169) is infelicitous.

One is left with a sad sense of a former master who has lost his grip. The nostalgic tone of the concluding pages, in which the author refers fondly to some of his earlier work, reinforces the impression. Still, even amid apparently failing powers, he can alert readers to potentially interesting approaches and pregnant comparisons. He points out (p. 238) that in the transformed circumstances of the 19th century, Calvo's and Vieira's plans for coercing China into commercial acquiescence with the demands of Western 'barbarians' came belatedly to pass. Gruzinski offers a sage, if disappointingly unexceptionable, conclusion: 'The early sixteenth century made a lasting mark on relations between Europe and the rest of the world. ... It is for historians and their ever fewer readers to learn to appreciate the diversity of the situations, the singularity of the trajectories and the complexity of the links' (p. 174). Ever fewer readers? Ways to get more, if one wants them, are to think searchingly, conjure vividly, and write powerfully.

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