

Reviews (Books)

Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939. By James Belich. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009. 592pp. NZ price: \$64.99. ISBN 978-0-19-929727-6.

JAMES BELICH sets out to describe and explain the remarkable explosion in the nineteenth century in the size and wealth of the Anglo world, reflected in its massive population growth, the rise of megacities and expansion of its industrial wealth, taking an approach which is resolutely and applaudably historical, conceptual and comparative. This is grand history on a global scale, an outstanding contribution to the world history genre that has produced many excellent books in recent years.¹ Indeed, Belich firmly situates his work within this field and takes issue with many of the central themes and debates about the driving forces of the European Age of global history, especially the rise to centrality of the English-speaking nations. That the Anglo world would become so central and powerful was not at all predictable before the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, the Spanish world, the French world, the Chinese world, and even the Indian and Russian worlds, were larger, richer and more powerful, at least until the early eighteenth century. After that time, and in spite of, or perhaps because of, the American War of Independence (which initially sundered the Anglo Atlantic zone), from 1815 the demographically and economically reunifying Anglo zone rapidly moved to centre stage. It has remained there ever since, eclipsing and sometimes militarily defeating rival zones. But now, in the twenty-first century, it seems the Anglo world is at last losing its hegemony, to be replaced probably not by a new hegemonic zone, based in China or India or Europe, but by a much more complex interstate and non-state system with far greater flows of knowledge and understanding of the whole by the particular and far greater human subjective agency. It seems clear that no zone will dominate again. A truly globalized world is not one that can tolerate hegemony of the old geopolitical and economic kinds but is one in which global problems of wealth, poverty, justice, liberty and, above all, of environmental restitution, have to be dealt with on several levels and through multiple global agencies that transcend national state power. The rise of non-national institutionalized entities on larger, smaller and more diffuse scales is already characterizing the twenty-first century. The international state system which was so characteristic of the twentieth century (and which perhaps still has a good deal of life left in it) is giving way to this more complex structure.

The concept of ‘worlds’ employed by Belich is useful. Alternative possible concepts for these sorts of macrostructures could be ‘civilizations’, ‘zones’ and ‘empires’, but none of these is adequate to his task for none captures the cultural and geopolitical complexity of the structure he is examining. The Anglo ‘world’, like the other ‘worlds’, is not reducible to any of these other structures but, he argues, it has its own definite structural reality at a macro level. Within these ‘worlds’ there is a substructure of states, empires, nations, economies, and so on. Then what constitutes the reality of the Anglo world? That is, what ties it together such that it forms a more or less coherent structure or system that has evolved over time?

It is no accident that these ‘worlds’ of Belich’s analysis, and particularly the Anglo world, are defined linguistically. A language and the culture that it frames define the most powerful mode of identity and social cohesion in human experience. *Homo economicus*, *homo socialis* and *homo politikon* cannot exist without the foundation of *homo communicans* and the social structuring and historical construction process of *homo faber* that is made possible by language. The rise to power, dominance and even hegemony, of certain linguistically based hemispheric and world-straddling cultures and socio-economic systems (such as the Sinic, Hellenistic, Latin, Arabic, Persian/Mughal, Anglo, Hispanic, Russian,

French) has been occurring for millennia. The process has been particularly evident since the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The impulse to imperialist incorporation of ever-greater territory and population and the inclusion, often forcible, of subject peoples into the imperial culture have marked humanity ever since the advent of settled agricultural existence, urbanization and civilization. Cultural incorporation has not necessarily been the basic impetus to imperialism but it has been the consequence. From imperialism, and later from the emergence of 'worlds' of hegemony, have flowed material and cultural benefits to the dominant peoples, both on a class basis and on a wider ethnocentric basis. Empires and worlds have arisen through the socio-biological attributes of *homo* as *communicans*, *faber* and *economicus*, united against others who have not shared the *communicans* attributes. How else can we explain the rise of the 'Anglo', 'Hispanic', 'Francophone', etc, worlds, despite the internal divisions that they have always contained, as broadly more or less united entities?

There have been alternative concepts of the emergence and development of 'worlds' or macro socio-political and economic entities, most of which are not linguistically and culturally derived but instead based on economic and geopolitical concepts and theories. Of course Belich is not denying the power of economics and geopolitics as real social forces as well as theories, but he has powerfully restored the significance of ethnocentric ideology to world geopolitical economy from the eighteenth century. In making this restoration what he has restored is much of the thinking and conceptualization that occurred from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and which is still with us but overshadowed by supposedly more 'scientific' modes of discourse. The power of economic developmental thinking in Western societies since the advent of classical economics from the late eighteenth century, including the recent rise to supposed authority of development economics since the 1940s and its close connections with rational choice theory, and the more recent significance of geopolitical theory, especially since the collapse of bipolarism in the early 1990s, have obscured within academic/social scientific thought an older discourse about culture, language and associated ideas of race. While this older discourse was neglected and even actively abandoned because of its associations with cultural domination and racism, there was a benign theoretical kernel about how language and culture influences world history that still has much value. Moreover, ideas of culture and race were, and still are, powerful forces in history and none more so than in the long nineteenth century. Can there be a connection made between Belich's cultural/settler-driven 'worlds' and the various concepts of 'international economic development', 'world system' and 'global system', formulated in earliest form by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, developed by Marx and Weber, and refined by Wallerstein, Schwartz and many others?² Belich goes some way towards situating his work in this wider field of studies, but a lot more could have been said on the conceptual and theoretical level about alternative approaches to the world socio-economic history of the past three centuries.

On the other hand, it was unmistakably not his intention to write a book of theory. His approach comes clearly from the history mode of thought rather than the social science mode *à la* Wallerstein, Schwartz and others. This is not a false distinction, unfortunately. It matters if one comes to this broad field of world/global history anchored firmly in one or other of those standpoints for it tends to privilege either theory or detailed evidence. But even though Belich is a historian he has gone a long way towards producing an impressive work of social science history that straddles, unites and synthesizes social science and history.³ Methodologically, Belich's contribution to understanding this global historical process of the past several centuries is of great significance for he operates on two of the fundamental methodological planes that are necessary to grasp and explain this process — factual-causal historical narrative and conceptualization. On these levels he demonstrates a masterful command of a vast literature and an intelligent understanding of recent debates about divergence and convergence between zones of the settler worlds.

But theory and quantification must also be part of this bigger and more comprehensive, and therefore more persuasive, explanation of the past few hundred years. Theory is more than conceptualization and more than broad interpretation, both of which contribute to theory construction and are directly affected by theory. By ‘theory’ is meant the abstract formulation of the presumed, or hypothesized, or discovered, fundamental causal connections, structures, mechanisms and processes that lie within and strongly influence the phenomena and processes of the world. Theory is the most underdeveloped dimension of Belich’s social science history of the Anglo world. While he has many interesting concepts that add up to a causal-descriptive framework about the process of the ‘settler revolution’ as a broad set of phenomena, he still lacks a genuine theory about the deeper levels of process that drove the phenomena to fall into a definite pattern over a long timespan. The way multidimensional processes of industrialization, economic development, settler mass migration, mega-urbanization and the rise of a cohesive Anglo world to economic and geopolitical dominance, all came together in the particular way that it did does need some more comprehensive explanation, which he seems unsure about wanting to provide. While rejecting quasi-racial and institutional explanations as significant, he adopts the Braudelian ‘conjuncture’ as a superior concept to over-determined ‘path dependency’ and ‘history as chaos’ ideas.

Mega-change can happen quite quickly from the intersection of two or more new developments, such as wars, revolutions, or the emergence of new technologies or ideologies — in our case, all four. The development may be autonomous initially, but once they begin interacting their full flowering is caused by each other, like the proverbial chicken and egg. Fernand Braudel’s concept of ‘conjuncture’ is one term for this; a ‘cause-effect spiral’ is another. This book develops a hypothesis along these lines, positing a resonant interaction between the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions and an underestimated ‘Settler Revolution’. The settler revolution, it is argued, was itself a synergy between ideological and (initially non-industrial) technological shifts. (p.9)

So, from this statement it is patent that Belich does not want to offer a real explanatory theory — the book contains neither a theory nor a more or less conclusive account — but a ‘hypothesis’ about a conjuncture. That hypothesis includes his use of the concepts of ‘explosive colonization’, ‘busts’ and ‘re-colonization’ to describe what he sees as the repeating pattern (not a cycle) of the long-run process of the settler revolution. Braudel, however, went further in his framework for he attempted to uncover the deep time of long-run socio-economic history. Conjunctures were but one level of his analysis of structural change in the *longue durée* Belich seems to have eschewed these other levels of geographical, climatological and socio-biological determinants, and downplays geopolitics (especially warfare) and the possibility of quasi-autonomous evolutionary processes of technological and capitalist-regulatory history. The Belich ‘hypothesis’, then, is really about the pattern of the process rather than about the deeper causes of the process, *à la* Braudel, involving human collective motivation and behaviour, capitalist structures and the forces of evolution within nineteenth-century capitalism.

Quantification is essential to uncovering and seeing the significance of causes and processes. By ‘quantification’ is *not* meant statistical techniques that attempt to establish correlations between aggregates of data that supposedly show a series of statistically significant conjunctions. The data series used in econometrical studies of history are rarely, if ever, the subject of source criticism and rarely tell us much of a story about what really happened over time in a structural process. Such ‘results’ are rarely tied together by causal narratives. Causal narratives are essential, as Chris Lorenz has persuasively argued. Together all four — narratives or descriptions, concepts, theories, quantified data — are the building blocks of social science history.⁴

Belich certainly quantifies his account of the settler revolution. Indeed, the rise of the Anglo world via its settler societal process was a massive transformation and the mere expression of its statistical dimensions of demography and economy tells a big part of the

story. From the twenty-first century standpoint within the comparatively stable Western developed world to look back at the scale of migration and growth, in the Atlantic region especially, in the long nineteenth century, is to be awe-struck. The only comparable process in scale in human history is happening at this very moment wholly within China. The scale of the demographic and economic shifts that are happening there are even greater. While we are cognizant of that current massive transformation it is good to be reminded that it is not the first time such change has occurred.

That Belich's statistical data are not presented in tabular form does not greatly matter for they are introduced into the text in a digestible and readable form that does not dominate the narrative. But this is not to the taste of many quantificatory historians, especially economic historians, and they have something of a case for criticism here. Belich could have summarized some of his important data in tabular form in order to make his case more watertight and more persuasive. A table or a graph, like a picture, sometimes tells a thousand words and paints a big picture. Statistical data do not necessarily tell their own story. They have to be contextualized and interpreted, but tables and graphs are a big aid to that, allowing long-run perspective and comparison across time and place. Of course narrative can do that but not as precisely. If, for example, Belich had presented all his data on immigration from 'oldlands' to 'newlands' by decade or, better still, by boom/bust cycle, for the long nineteenth century, in tabular and graphic form, his argument could have been even more dramatically supported. Of course, many demographic historians (such as Hatton and Williamson) have done a lot of this, but not in such a way as to immediately support Belich's conceptual framework about the phases of boom/bust/recovery/recolonization that he so powerfully shows were fundamental in the nineteenth century.⁵

Belich situates the 'beginning' of the rise of the Anglo world (nothing is ever really a beginning in history) at 1783, the end of the American War of Independence. It was widely thought at that moment that the North Atlantic Anglosphere was fractured and that the Spanish and French rivals would exploit this division. But, in fact, as Belich cogently shows, as the nineteenth century went on there was a great rapprochement between Britain and the United States, born of language, culture, trade, investment and migration; and, furthermore, the 1783 fracture led directly to the strengthening and widening of the Anglo world in British North America and the British South Pacific. Industrialization, economic development, population growth and settler transfer then drew the North Atlantic and the rest of the Anglo world more closely together.

Belich is right to place the creation and growth of settler societies at the very centre of the world historical process of the modern era. He makes a strong case for this being the most important historical process of this 300-year era, around which economic, geopolitical, military and cultural processes find their meaning and logic. He argues it is the settler revolution that is fundamental to explaining all the others; that we cannot grasp the economic and geopolitical rise of Britain (actually Greater Britain) to dominance in the long nineteenth century, the eclipse of France, the failure of German grabs for global dominance, the peaceful transfer (in the sense of power shift across the Atlantic) of dominance to the United States in the post-1940s era, the existing power and continuing latent power of Russia, and the latent and finally emerging significance of the Ibero-world, without seeing how they all were strongly determined, positively and negatively, by the vast settler revolution of the 1815–1914 era. The developments of the century since 1914 were in a sense merely the consequences of that most transformative century.

However, there are powerful alternative frameworks for understanding the modern era that do not rely so strongly on the settler/linguistic conjuncture, particularly those based on more structural political-economistic reasoning that owe a good deal to the influence of Ricardo, Marx, von Thunen, Polanyi and Braudel. Theories of world and global processes, *à la* Wallerstein and Schwartz, as exemplars, try to build an even wider framework to incorporate all zones of the world into a single account. Of course this is not Belich's aim and his achievement is not to provide an alternative framework for the world history of the

modern era but to show the significance of the settler process to that era. As such, we are all in his debt. But building the bigger picture — of the *capitalist* revolution — towards which Marx, Braudel, Wallerstein, Schwartz, *et al*, have groped, is still the main agenda, especially so in the context of the environmental devastation of the planet, a devastation to which the Anglo settler nations have contributed and are contributing to a disproportionate degree with their culture of rapaciousness, impermanence and what we can call ‘new world or settler ultramodern capitalism’ that rejects tradition and stability in favour of constant innovation: a dynamic that springs directly from the settler capitalist mentality. On the other hand, there can also be discerned a world-wide pattern of parallel, divergent and convergent institutional development towards social democratic welfare capitalism that transcends the linguistic bases of particular settler worlds to make possible comparative histories of particular settler societies due to the similarities of material foundations of their histories. Settler capitalism as a special form of capitalism is still being actively theorised and studied independently of the ‘world’ in which each case is situated.⁶

The two big dangers inherent in the kind of grand narrative that Belich’s book epitomizes are teleological determination and a lack of significance given to contingency. Teleology versus contingency is a central philosophical problematic in all social explanation and used to be also central to national historical discourses. There is always a temptation to write the story backwards; to tell the story as if there were only ever one possible trajectory and therefore only the present outcome was possible. On the other hand, looking back there was actually only one trajectory, the trajectory of what actually happened in broad terms; the historian is faced with the task of explaining what did happen. What was the course of events and the structural evolution, why did the contingencies result in this outcome and no other? The actuality can be explained in teleological and non-teleological ways, and of course the historical actuality is not simply available to unintended observation. Good social science history relies on the subtle interpenetration of reportage, interpretation, understanding and explanation. Belich’s use of ‘conjuncture’ has enabled him to avoid the pitfalls of teleology and produce a masterpiece of social science history, made all the better by being highly readable.

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NOTES

1 See, for example, C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*, Malden, MA, 2004; J. Goldstone, *Why Europe? The Rise of the West in World History, 1500-1850*, New York, 2009; R.B. Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty First Century*, Second Edition, Lanham, 2007; K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, 2000; J.C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900*, Montreal, 2003. Further useful examples are cited in the following notes.

2 H.M. Schwartz, *States Versus Markets: The Emergence of a Global Economy*, 3rd Edition, London, 2010; I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 Vols, New York and San Diego, 1974, 1980, 1989.

3 Compare C. Lloyd, ‘Towards Unification: Beyond the Antinomies of Knowledge in Historical Social Science’, *History and Theory*, 47, 2008, pp.396-412.

4 C. Lorenz, ‘Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the “Metaphorical Turn”’, *History and Theory*, 37, 1998, pp.309-29.

5 T. Hatton and J.G. Williamson, *Global Migration and the World Economy: Two Centuries of Policy and Performance*, Boston, 2005.

6 Compare the pioneering work D. Denoon, *Settler Capitalism: the Dynamics of Dependent Development in the Southern Hemisphere*, Oxford and New York, 1983; C. Lloyd and J. Metzger, ‘Settler Colonization and Societies in World History’, in C. Lloyd, J. Metzger and R. Sutch (eds), *Settler Economies in World History*, Leiden, 2011; C. Lloyd, ‘Institutional Patterns of the Settler Societies: Hybrid, Parallel, and Convergent’, in C. Lloyd, J. Metzger and R. Sutch (eds), *Settler Economies in World History*, Leiden, 2011.