HY2246

INTRODUCTION TO WORLD HISTORY

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BOOK REPORT

Grade: B+
A bit rough, but interesting and often insightful. Use of published reviews not appropriate but acceptable here.
About the book

The book I had chosen was titled “Dominance by design: Technological imperatives and America’s civilizing mission” written by Michael Adas. The book was printed in the United States of America in 2006, published by the Harvard University Press and has a total of 415 pages from its introduction to its epilogue. Michael Adas is an American historian who specializes in the history of technology, anti-colonialism and in global history. I believe one of his literatures titled Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance published in 1989 and the September 11 attacks became an inspiration for him to offer his viewpoints and knowledge on the American history of technology and its impacts in the book I chose to review: Dominance by Design.

Introduction

There are seven main chapters excluding introduction and epilogue. Each chapter of the book is a case study recounting a major episode in United States’ expansionism and the interactions between the Americans and foreign peoples and cultures. Michael Adas had presented these case studies in a chronological fashion spread over nearly four centuries from North America to the Philippines, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf in 1991. Each of his case studies also “illustrates broader patterns of the interplay among technological changes in American society, their transfer to foreign cultures, and the responses of

1 Adas argued it wasn’t skin color but the technological backwardness that the African, Indian and Chinese cultures possessed at the time that influenced the opinions of Western scholars on their superiority.
nonwestern peoples to American interventions.” (Please see Appendix A for a graphical representation on these chapters.)

Michael Adas had linked certain ideas (which will be examined in later part of this report) he introduced in the previous chapters to the next. His ideas were supported by a mixture of eyewitnesses, recurring metaphors and cross-cultural projections.

The seven main ideas
In the first chapter titled “‘Engins’ in the Wilderness”, Michael Adas described how the English had formed ideas and perceptions (often bias reports and stereo-typing) on the native Indians inhabiting the “New World”. The ‘evidence’ that the English had gathered to justify their dispossession of these benighted peoples was the perceived Indian’s technological backwardness, savagery and un-productivity such as their inability to cultivate and harness the resources on their lands (57), their lack of land-ownership (49) and their style of waging warfare (55). The English who attained a higher stage of civilization, created the scientific knowledge and technology required to harness the land’s abundant resources, which had been believed to be squandered by the indigenous inhabitants. (65)

The second chapter “Machines and Manifest Destiny” gave evidence on the importance of technological prowess that built American’s national identity, its civilizing theories and its interventionism overseas through recurring metaphors and artists’ impressions on the industrialization efforts of the Americans. The author’s main idea in this chapter had demonstrated how America pursued local expansionism so aggressively that it nearly caused the Amerindians to extinct. While America was fulfilling its technological

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3 Such as Fanny Frances Palmer’s Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (1866) and Thomas Gast’s American Progress(1872) which celebrated American’s technology.
advancement and local expansion, the American expansionists had already set their goals on a much wider global mission of civilizing other countries or civilizations deemed as inferior to America’s. In the course of overseas expansion, for example in China, Michael Adas had argued how the American missionaries and travelers often gave bias reports that helped the Americans to further stereo-typed the Chinese just as how they stereo-typed the Amerindians.

The next chapter on “Engineers’ Imperialism” described how the Americans felt for the fact that their superiority of civilization and their advancement in industrial activities had actually gave them a destiny of exercising social influence on other nations. For example, American’s “little war” with the Spanish over the Philippines became one of the cornerstones for future American foreign policies. The author’s idea about American’s war in Philippines was not just about a military conflict but it was a “vast engineering project” (144) where Filipinos were viewed as a set of technical problems that could be addressed by institutional adjustments and American technological inputs while ignoring the Filipinos' beliefs, customs and modes of social interaction.4

The fourth chapter “Foundations of an American Century” examined how American’s achievements on the Panama Canal surpassed its European rivals in terms of innovation, productivity and organization, and its late entry into World War 1 where American’s “innovative weaponry and battlefield tactics were restoring the possibility of maneuver and decisive combat, intervention in the conflict reaffirmed the abiding American confidence

that **science and technology could be potent antidotes** to despotism, militarist aggression, and human miscalculation.” (201)⁵

In the chapter titled “Imposing Modernity”, United States’ prestige of technology and science was stunned by the Russian’s advances to the space (240) that caused U.S. to come up with modernization theory to resuscitate its technological triumphalism (243). During the Cold War between the U.S and the former Soviet Union (S.U), two opposing ideologies on development formulas were devised or imposed on emerging countries called the consumer capitalist (U.S) and command communist (S.U). The main idea of the next chapter, “Machines in Vietnam Quagmire” was that emerging countries such as Vietnam became an experiment and a pivotal confrontation in the proxy war between the U.S and the Soviet Union. In the last chapter, America, being the only superpower left after the Cold War, achieved crushing victory over Iraq in 1991’s Gulf War reaffirmed America’s “long-cherished faith in its technological and its ability to manage the turbulent developing world.(380)” ⁶ American’s victory also became a significant celebration over America’s major defeat in foreign conflict in Vietnam.

**Analytical critique**

Michael Adas is pushing a unifying theme throughout his book: “We as Americans like to put our template on things. And our template’s good, but it’s not necessarily good for everyone else.” ⁷ Although the United States had gone through different phases of its technological advances, it is still relatively slow and inflexible to the ever-changing dynamics of a nation’s political and cultural infrastructures, especially of the Asian nations.

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⁵ Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America’s Civilizing Mission. Page 201.


The ethnic-diverse non-western world cannot be simply grasped by any advanced civilization and non-western people cannot be viewed as a set of technical problem that can be solved with high technology and scientific superiority. Technology transfers have different effects on different societies and American’s passion for scientific technologies became hindsight for its colonial-imperial experiments to the current globalization initiatives. America’s continued involvement in foreign conflicts and over-responding to wars with their high-technologies had placed the American civilians as primary targets for the terrorists. Throughout the U.S.’ military history, the Americans condemned guerilla attacks and dismissed them as cowardly and barbaric. Similarly, recipients (or victims) of America’s civilizing offensives had also dismissed U.S.’ high-tech weaponry portraying the U.S as a “cowardly nation unwilling to back up its principles with genuine sacrifices”.

Michael Adas, as a historian had targeted his book to other historians on American history, the general American public and hopefully the military advisers and policymakers governing America. After collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. became a standing global power left unchecked and this had propelled America into over-committing itself to an old-age civilizing mission and this posed domestic dangers such as national solvency and the inability to maintain American living standards due to national deficits. At the international level, the “current inclination of American politicians and media continue to demonize nations resistant to incorporation into the U.S.-dominated global system may well push Korea, Iran, and other developing countries to accelerate research programs on the production of nuclear weaponry” (407) and mass weapons of destruction so as to cope

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8 Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America’s Civilizing Mission. Page 403.
with America’s high-tech military. Indirectly speaking, America’s hegemony might propel the entire world into international insecurity (terrorism).

Michael Adas had successfully demonstrated his expertise on the history of technology to identify similar patterns of America’s current involvement in wars with the use of technologies to warn his readers about the dangers of America’s foreign policies and involvement in foreign conflicts. Adas gave the readers and me an essential guide (with interesting story-telling based on facts) to “America’s past and present role in the world as well as cautionary lessons for the future.”

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Bibliography


Appendices

Appendix A: Main case studies Michael Adas used to describe the motivations that interact with American’s beliefs in its technological imperatives. The U.S’ involvement in the Korean War was briefly mentioned to compare with the Vietnam War.