

The Indo-Pacific and the Age of Revolution

Sujit Sivasundaram. *Waves Across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 496. Paper: \$20.00.

Oceanic metaphors do a lot of work in this new book by Sujit Sivasundaram. *Waves Across the South: A New History of Revolution and Empire* analyses the “clash of waves” that occurred when Europeans moved into the Indo-Pacific region during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (5). It describes the “crests” of Indigenous creativity as well as the “turbulence” of imperial violence. There are “surges” of politics and “tides of the modern” (353). The watery theme is agreeable, for the most part, reminding readers of the region under question and of its interest in those standing on the beach. Readers steeped in the relevant historiography might even want to add another meaning to the “waves” of the author’s title, appreciating this new work as a kind of hand wave *from* the south. It is a clear signal to northern- and Western-focused historians. Here we are—waving, not drowning. Come on in. The water’s fine.

Indeed, the book’s biggest contribution is to refocus attention on a relatively forgotten quarter of the globe in so-called world history. It contends that the Indo-Pacific region has not only been neglected by scholars but also that it played a critical part in the making of “the modern condition” (1). World historians need to take greater note of the Indo-Pacific, Sivasundaram argues, if they want to see beyond the limitations of Western liberalism as the core ingredient of modernity and thus the main frame for possible imaginings of the future. What the Indo-Pacific region offers, he goes on, is a model for how people resisted or reshaped European ideas of race, governance,

trade, and gender, at least as much as they adopted them.

Sivasundaram’s vision of the Indo-Pacific is genuinely expansive and evenly generous. It includes—with roughly equal attention to each group—Pacific Islanders, Australian Aboriginals, Indians, Mauritians, Indonesians, Southern Africans, Southeast Asians, and many different peoples from China and the Persian Gulf. From Aotearoa to Madagascar to Oman to Madras, Sivasundaram follows his protagonists as they zip around the enormous region, sensitively seeking their specific perspectives as agents in history rather than as objects of history. We follow the embassy of Tipu Sultan of Mysore, for example, sent to Mauritius to gain alliance with French republicans there in order to fight British intrusion elsewhere. We also trace Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, the Malay scribe of Stamford Raffles who traveled from Melaka to Singapore to Mecca, keeping a constant eye on new scientific thinking for local benefits. Sivasundaram is consistent in his attempt to center non-Europeans in his long and rich narration of the Global South.

Given the book’s focus on the period between the 1790s and the 1840s, when Europeans intensified their intrusion into the Indo-Pacific nearly fourfold through imperial means, *Waves Across the South* is not only a contribution to world history. It is also a vital addition to modern imperial history. It extends new work underway that tries to understand the history of modern empires from the viewpoint of those they encountered. And it employs techniques modeled by Christopher Bayly, Tony Ballantyne, and others that show how empires in this formative era proceeded in uneven movements, back and forth, in often entangling ways. This book is surely the most

inclusive survey of Indo-Pacific experiences of modern empire yet published.

Given all this, it seems that the subtitle of *Waves Across the South* should have been *A New History of Empire in the Age of Revolution*. Sivasundaram's multitudinous tales collectively offer a broad-ranging, compelling, and convincing account of imperial mechanisms and repercussions through the period now known as the Revolutionary Age. It illuminates both a topic and its era, but the focus is far more on the nuances of modern empire than on the nature of modern revolution. The book's actual subtitle, *A New History of Revolution and Empire*, opens it up for some criticism that it need not have entertained. None of the preceding 442 pages unpicks or explains revolution as well as they do empire.

The introduction is promising. Sivasundaram states he wishes to challenge the "pernicious assumption" that modernity—born out of the age of revolution—was "crafted in the West" and then copied by the non-West (2). This "objectionable sentiment" is still dominant in some surveys of the period, in which the focus remains on the European birth of industrial efficiency, scientific ascendancy, nationalist ideals, rights discourse, and the individualized self (2). Underlying so much of this focus is a sense of these notions latterly leaking outward from "western" regions to the rest of the world, often via streams forged by empire. Sivasundaram rightly insists the process of modernization was much more jagged than this.

If the thesis then turned to how Indo-Pacific interactions with "westerners" tested, refined, expanded, and ultimately coproduced the revolutionary ideas of modernity, it would have been in keeping with Sivasundaram's radical take on empire. Instead, at critical moments, Sivasundaram dilutes the specificity of revolution when it comes to Indigenous people, having it simply mean any resistance to any intrusion, or what he variously calls "a surge of indigenous and non-European politics" (2), or Indigenous "subversion" (61). There might be some mileage in adding Indigenous resistance to the types of revolutionary activities that went on in the era in question. But the cost, of course, would be to make the objects of these activities lose all historical specificity—objects such as representative government or free trade. After all, Indigenous people have been resisting European incursions for centuries. If all resistance is revolutionary, then we can no longer see the particularity of what, say, Tongans were doing to modern ideas of rule when they entered into debates with Europeans about the potential of monarchy. Neither can we see exactly what the Eora were adding to modern understandings of constitutionalism when they started to use petitioning for their own ends against settlers. Under Sivasundaram's general definition, the resistant

activities of Indigenous people lose the kind of detailed texture concerning time and place that is regularly awarded to Western people.

This problem is deepened when, at other times, Sivasundaram introduces a third way of understanding revolution, which is neither a nest of protomodern ideas about energy, science, nation, democracy, and self nor a generalized notion of resistance but now something that is always and everywhere the opposite of empire. He writes: "Within the Indian and Pacific Oceans there was a contest between revolution and an imperial system which perverted the course of revolution and constituted a counter-revolution" (2). Elsewhere the author repeats that "empire emerges as a counter-revolutionary force" (26), or, again, in more extended fashion: "Empire was a counter-revolt not only in its attempt to adopt the ideology, knowledge, restlessness and mobility of the age of revolutions. It was also so in substantially closing down the width of possibilities of the age of revolutions ... empire co-opted the dreams of the global South and sent these dreams into reverse gear" (39).

The much more serious cost of this move is to wipe out any space to contribute to the important debate, invoked by postcolonial studies more than a generation ago, about how far empire is in fact intimately and inextricably bound up with modern revolutionary ideas. We cannot have a discussion here about how, for example, rights discourse, as constituted in the early nineteenth century, had oppressions and silencing techniques embedded in it. Under these conditions, how can we explain those times when revolution is itself imperial? It is highly notable that James Belich's conceptualization of "the Settler Revolution" is not mentioned once in the book. Belich's book, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (2011), which incidentally took most of its examples from the Global South, argued that sometimes empire was the very incarnation of revolution. To say the aggressive high point of settler colonization was merely empire co-opting revolution is to overlook the imperializing factors already potentially within the ideas of progress, efficiency, and liberty that drove white emigration.

There are a couple of other puzzling moments in this book, though both understandable, given the vastness of the scope. The first is the disjuncture between the author's summative claims that this book is about the British Empire in particular and the very many examples he provides about the French Empire. We never find any acknowledgment of this mismatch. Without an explanation of why Sivasundaram thinks the British Empire was somehow the most representative or leading empire in the world at the time, the gathering French-related anecdotes start to look undermining rather than additive.

The second oddity involves the discussion of Indigenous Australians in chapter 5. In the opening of this chapter, Sivasundaram writes that imperial intrusion in Sydney meant that “Aboriginal Australians were wiped off the land” (167). This seems a curiously annihilating statement given the overall argument about resistance, perseverance, and ultimate survival. It is also directly countered by the author’s citation ten pages later of the historian Grace Karskens, who has declared that “it is time to shake off the idea that Sydney was a ‘white city,’ that Aboriginal people simply faded out of the picture and off the ‘stage of history.’ It is simply untrue.” At this point, Sivasundaram agrees,

adding that “Aboriginal Australians found a place for themselves in the city” (178).

An occasional contradiction hardly dents the achievement of the mass of stories provided in *Waves Across the South*. The problematic handling of the idea of revolution is a weightier issue, but it is perhaps compensated for by the freshness of the book’s illuminations about the idea of modern empire. As a demonstration of what world history might look like if it paid greater attention to the swirling gyres of activity going on in the Global South, the work is a success.

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