

## One World Divisible: A Global History

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**Reviewer:**

Scott Lucas

Once in a long while a work of such scope and magnitude is published that our assumptions about history - its events, its causes, its effects - are fundamentally challenged.

This is not such a work.

David Reynolds is a superb historian. He has made vital contributions to international history with publications like *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41* and has integrated social, cultural, and international history in his book *Rich Relations: the American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945*. *One World Divisible* ostensibly writes Reynolds' interpretation large 'to highlight people as much as process'. (xix) Chapters on 'cultures and families' and 'color, creed, and coups' sit next to more orthodox (at least from the standpoint of diplomatic history) counterparts on the East-West conflict, Arab-Israeli disputes, and the post-Cold War world.

This objective is creditable. Nor should one dismiss Reynolds' forthright declaration that the narrative of history, incorporating social, cultural, and ideological dimensions at all levels, is constructed 'around...the central, political mechanism of the dialectic', the building of the State. Whatever the virtues of evaluating a 'mass' history, avoiding concentration upon elites, or of considering class, religion, race, ethnicity, and geography, Reynolds' case - that it is the effort to organise and maintain the strength of the central authority against challenges from within and without - is a strong one.

Yet the challenge remains to integrate these considerations into a dynamic conception of how movements outside the formal political process modify and affect State activity, and it is clear that, in practice, that this is not Reynolds' main concern. What is offered is not a 'global' history but an 'international' history in which not all States are equal. By the 21<sup>st</sup> of 880 pages, Reynolds has fallen back upon the comfortable, bipolar

framework of post-1945 history: 'fundamental contrasts between the United States and the Soviet Union, between democratic localism and bureaucratic centralism, between capitalism and communism'. Even Britain, which arguably should occupy a key position in the traditional narrative of the early Cold War, is an onlooker, entering the story only after 'a change of [US] policy' because of 'the awareness that the Europeans could not cope with the [1947 economic] crisis alone'. (27)

Leaving aside other omissions in this standard tale of diplomatic history - NSC 68, the most important US document of the early Cold War as the blueprint for global victory over Soviet Communism, is never mentioned - what is striking is how Reynolds' 'social' sections sit uneasily in his history. After four chapters on the economic, political, and military exchanges between 'East' and 'West', Reynolds abruptly shifts to a section on 'Cities and Consumers'. What follows is a narrative of progress for both the developed and developing worlds. The opportunity to critique that narrative is always eschewed: Reynolds offers a table to emphasise the decline, in absolute terms, in infant mortality rates throughout the world since 1925. Another reader might note the sharp increase in disparity in relative terms between countries - India had a rate approximately three times that of the United Kingdom in 1925; the rate is now eight times greater. Reynolds, instead of grappling with the issue, wanders into a discussion of 'self-build' among squatter communities, a comforting 'reminder that most of the world's population still created their own living spaces, unaffected by trends in formal architecture'. (153)

'Culture' exists in this book as anecdote amidst. 'The Consumption of Culture' has two paragraphs on 'concern about American economic and cultural penetration' of Europe with blithe comment such as 'for most Frenchmen and women, civilisation did mean bathtubs and Frigidaires, rather than Molière and Monet'. (290) Then we're off to television, abstract expressionism, and classical music: culture marches on.

Similarly we have 'women on the move' with the US story of housewife to feminist to 'mainstream' political activist extended around the world and then the conclusion: 'the principal catalyst for women's liberation was economic development'. (320) Race is a bit more problematic for Reynolds, given that continued tensions within countries such as the US and between countries such as in Africa threaten a tale of uplift, so after 15 pages early in the book, the issue disappears except for concluding references such as 'African Americans remained a special case'. (649)

Perhaps this is unfair, given that Reynolds has taken on all of global history since 1945. The topic is too large to be handled in any one volume. Those authors who have written 'broad' histories have succeeded by focusing on a single concept to organise their histories. Thus Paul Kennedy could structure his narrative about the cyclical Rise and Fall of the Great Powers - those areas which did not touch upon the thesis were not covered.

Yet Reynolds has also set out organising concepts. First, he wants to know 'whether liberal traditions of representative government could cope with democracy', in this case, the challenges from the 'vanguard democracy' of the Soviet Union and the 'militarised mass democracy' of Nazi Germany. Second, he seeks to discover 'whether the management of modern industrial economies could be left to market forces'. In short, Reynolds' quest is that of the 'Western', anti-Communist liberal since 1945.

And where that liberalism is vulnerable, so is Reynolds. He frets in the concluding chapter, 'Culture wars and immigration: race, poverty, and violence - these were just a few of the problems facing America in the 1990s' and, more significantly, 'black poverty and unemployment reflected a general marginalisation of unskilled workers in a globalising economy'. Looking beyond the US, he considers 'globalization and its contents' and ponders, 'The biggest losers from expanded world markets in finance and trade were those outside the triad' of North America, the European Union, and Japan.

Now you might think that this would be the opportunity for Reynolds to test his hypothesis on 'modern industrialised economies' and 'market forces'. No, that might raise some very tricky issues about increasing inequality in income and living standards, even within 'developed' countries, and about the incompatibility between 'progress' and domination of the global economy by elites within a few key national and

multinational systems. Reynolds reassures us, 'The technologies of globalization could also encourage localisation,' (655) and then leaves the issue, never to return.

There are two telling passages in this book. At the outset, Reynolds makes clear, 'A Marxist historiography is in retreat.' For Reynolds, Marxism is the theory of 'class struggle' and 'socialists, it seems, are turning into capitalists, workers are becoming consumers'. (3) Well, that's that, then.

Seven hundred pages later, Reynolds ends his book with a summary of warfare, abortion, and global 'structural change' - 'The mechanism of historical change is human suffering.' But, to ensure we're not too depressed, he cites two demographers on the African famine: 'The real lessons were not how easily man succumbed to the drought but how tenacious he was in managing he was in managing his survival.' (701) Reynolds soothes, 'Human beings are uniquely capable of transcending their current predicament by thought and creativity.' (702) Culture and liberalism march on.

Reynolds' grand themes are illusory because testing them would require a more rigorous examination of 'history' than he is prepared to offer. One does not need to be a Marxist to know that the control of economic power is still the primary force in this world and to observe that, amidst issues such as crippling 'Third World' debt and the threat to millions on the African continent from AIDS (mentioned in one brief paragraph by Reynolds), history is often an attempt to evade this issue. This may not be class struggle. It may not even be a struggle - that implies the victims have the possibility to fight - but it certainly deserves consideration in any 'global' history.

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