

Recensión.

## **Review of "Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World", Andrew Lambert (2019) (in English).**

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# MIDDLE GROUND JOURNAL



*Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World*. Andrew Lambert. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780300251487.

In the tradition of the analysis of political structures or *longue durée* studies, Andrew Lambert delivers a book that is simultaneously a history of the seapower states and a theory about the existence of particular (cosmo)vision, culture, identity, and/or policy, that belong to the seapower states.

Such seapower vision-culture opposed to continental vision-culture, Lambert controversially argues, has only been practiced by Athens, Carthage, the Venetian Republic, the Dutch Republic, and England, and, in all of these states, only momentarily. The position that only five states have become seapowers during the complete history of the world is audacious, to say the least. But even if we are not convinced by his arguments, Lambert's book is a magnificent effort to build a relatively new perspective of political and cultural world history. This effort consists of a macrohistorical study of the dialectics between politics and culture, which could remind one of analogous and conspicuous endeavours performed by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah* or even those developed by Karl Marx in his analyses of world history.

With an effusive prose, Lambert arranges his theory in nine chapters: one dedicated to terminological and historiographical aspects (Chapter 1), five dedicated to each of the seapower states that he recognizes throughout history (Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8; one state per chapter, assessed chronologically from Athens to England), one about the sea states (Chapter 6), one about naval continental power (Chapter 7), and one about sea power and seapower states in recent decades (Chapter 9). All chapters are supported by multiple sources. The majority of Lambert's sources consist of "structural studies" or "*longue durée* histories" of the different

states, which could imply that they are not “primary sources.” This is not a significant defect for a global historian, but it could be a flaw in his theory.

In Chapter 1, the author defends his distinction between seapower states’ vision-culture and land-identified continental states’ vision-culture. Or, in other words, a dichotomy between seapower states’ ideology and the ideology belonging to all other states. Even if we are convinced of the existence of an ideological opposition between seapower and non-seapower states, this opposition seems to fall into a moral Manicheism. Seapower states are frequently described as benign “inclusive political systems” or “progressive systems,” and many continental states are described as “autocracies” or socially closed systems. He suggests that these characteristics will be “demonstrated” throughout the book. For example, Lambert stresses the place of sea states in the advancement of writing, commerce, banking, and spreading ideas (38).

In Chapter 2, we are immersed in Lambert’s polarized view; it is emphasized that the Athenian seapower state was free and progressive, which is presented as being in sharp contrast with a corresponding continental state that is described as having been static and conservative: Sparta. Chapter 3 compares the seapower state of Carthage with its nemesis, Rome. The former is described as a benevolent, open society; this account challenges the traditional historiographical vision of the nineteenth century and the black legend about intrinsic Punic treachery and malevolence. Rome’s identity, in contrast, is described as full of “militarised savagery, inexhaustible greed and a lust for conquest” (93). Lambert equivocally states that one of the major reasons Rome destroyed Carthage was Rome’s fear of an alternative identity or culture different from that of the “continental.” There is indeed an anti-seapower stance in some Roman intellectuals such as Cicero, Livy, and Appian, but that such a stance was derived from fear or immense greed is not demonstrated. For example, Rome was not politically or

ideologically motivated to accomplish Carthage's destruction in 146 BCE. It was necessary for the Romans to make Carthage's demise an international example of chastisement, as they also did in the case of Corinth's destruction (a non-sea state) during the same year of 146 BCE.

In Chapter 4, when the author assesses the vision, culture, and policies of the Venetian Republic from the twelfth through nineteenth centuries, he interestingly constructs several critiques against history's manipulation and obscuration perpetrated by some land powers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chapter 5 discusses the Dutch seapower state, where one theme stands out over others: Dutch internal political strife between the sea-identity supporters and land-identity supporters during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

One of the best argued chapters is the sixth, where Lambert contends that some states were sea states without becoming seapower states, as is the case of Rhodes or Genoa. And in Chapter 7, Lambert concentrates on the naval policies of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great during the first quarter of the eighteenth century to demonstrate how difficult it is for a continental power to become a seapower state. From the Russian example we can also conclude that a powerful state, with a powerful navy, is not a seapower state only for having a mighty navy, but it also needs to be a sea state, that is, one that recognizes that its power comes from the sea and that develops a maritime-centered culture and art. Chapter 9, dedicated to England, presents a cultural and political history of the most famed sea power state; there is a stimulating exposition of the ancient Greek, Carthaginian, and Roman historiographical and political influence over English policies.

Lambert's bold book deserves to be read by any specialist interested in world history theories. It reflects a deep modernist narrative, in the sense that it argues that one of the two main politico-cultural systems is always more progressive than the other, with "progress" being an

inveterate characteristic of modernist narratives. Such modernist narratives, believed to be old fashioned by some specialists, could also reveal an unconscious and indefinite speculative philosophy of history that asserts that progress is the ultimate morally benign goal or *telos* of history or, more precisely, its *telos* is an inclusive benevolent progress achieved primarily by the influence of the politics and culture of seapower states over the contemporary world: the “future has [teleologically, I infer] always belonged to seapower,” proclaims Lambert (329).

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