



Conquests and Cultures: An International History

Thomas Sowell

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This book is the culmination of 15 years of research and travels that have taken the author completely around the world twice, as well as on other travels in the Mediterranean, the Baltic, and around the Pacific rim. Its purpose has been to try to understand the role of cultural differences within nations and between nations, today and over centuries of history, in shaping the economic and social fates of peoples and of whole civilizations. Focusing on four major cultural areas (that of the British, the Africans (including the African diaspora), the Slavs of Eastern Europe, and the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere—*Conquests and Cultures* reveals patterns that encompass not only these peoples but others and help explain the role of cultural evolution in economic, social, and political development.

Conquests and Cultures: An International History Details

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From Reader Review Conquests and Cultures: An International History for online ebook

Sylvester Kuo says

A compilation of many of Sowell's work on the History of the rise and fall of different empires and how the subjugated people almost always survive and thrive on the newly given technology and experiences to destroy their own backwardness.

Kent Lundgren says

If you want to reexamine some of your assumptions about civilizations and cultures replacing one another (if you think about such things at all), this is a good book for you.

Sowell, as he is so very able to do, explicates the factors that suit particular cultures for survival at particular times, especially as they come into contact with other cultures. He calls the cumulative mass of those factors "cultural capital", a good definition and one that avoids any hint of a society's intrinsic worth.

Kent Lundgren

Paul Clayton says

I finished this book a couple weeks ago. I'll have more to say about it in the future. A must-read for all victims of the American Teachers Union.

Nick Gibson says

The final volume of Sowell's massive trilogy on culture, migration, conquest, and race. There is much to cover - even the closing summary is a two-hour read. Sowell's writing is dry compared to a Tom Wolfe essay (as you may expect from an empirical study such as this) but it is also forceful, organized, and mercifully clear. Some parts are truly fascinating, as in Sowell's dramatic narrative of Pizarro's conquest of Atahualpa's Incan empire.

The basic idea is one of cultural capital - that the skills, values, and characteristics of cultures determine those cultures' productivity and place in the world. Capital can be acquired, usually through diffusion and exchange between cultures, or lost. Because this capital is easier to lose than acquire, it is a scarce resource that has never been equally distributed between all cultures at all times.

In this volume, Sowell looks at the impact of conquest on human capital beginning with the Roman domination of Britain and ending with the European conquest of the Western Hemisphere. The implications of these studies dispel many common assumptions about imperialism and colonialism, and challenge the value-laden narratives of modern Progressive histories.

Philippe Dame says

Interesting history lesson but incredibly dense.

Eugene Kernes says

A historic survey of four different, diverse, and large categories of people in the world with the main focus on how conquests changed the region. This is a history book of change, not determinism. If a particular people and their culture shows a certain trend, as Sowell takes great measure to show, that trend can reverse itself over time. From being conquered to being the conquerors, from being technologically superior to playing technological catch up, from being illiterate to producing genius. Cultures are not deterministic of a peoples' fate, but can change, sometimes that change comes from being conquered or conquering.

The categories under observation are the British, African, Slavic, and Western Hemisphere Indians. Each chapter focuses initially on geography of the people followed by a short generalization of what the people are mostly known for. Each group is then split based on occupying region, for the regional differences impacted how conquests impacted them. The further away a region is from the conquer center, the less impacted the region may be. Opportunities presented them to the conquered with the nobles changing their very language to engage politically with the conquerors while the masses tended to fall behind, creating resentment and class struggle.

Conquerors tended to lose a few or many initial battles, but over time their superiority claimed victory. The battles were often bloody and the conquerors do bring with them much pain, but the conquerors also bring with them technology and their culture. Other times, the conquerors recognize the cultural superiority of their conquered, and integrate the conquered culture. To make use of the regions conquered, the conquerors bring their technology along. Living standards often declined when conquerors leave, as becoming independent nations could not maintain the technology and did not have skill to replicate the technology. The conquerors political organization provided stability to many regions, but when the conquerors leave, the regions sometimes cannot maintain the policies which held together diverse groups of people.

Geography had a major factor to play in which regions created conquerors and the conquered. Transportation costs are largely determined by geography which determine what can be traded and how much trade there is. Trade means a dispersion of technology and ideas. Initially, regions next to large bodies of water could trade by ship, with water transport being less costly than moving goods via land. Not until railroads came about did land transport become cheap enough in many regions to make trade profitable. Transportation could make many natural resources cost prohibitive for extraction. But transportation is not the only reason for the difference between conquerors and conquered, other reasons include having pack animals, the skills necessary to utilize the geographic resources and having right incentives in place to allow the utilization. Many times, only with foreign help could the resources be utilized, as foreigners provided many valuable skills and services.

Sowell's descriptions focus on the internal cultural situation of the peoples. This book has varied timelines, for many empires and peoples only once existed such as the in the Western Hemisphere Indians, while many African and Slavic nations are relatively new politically. Expressing the changes in language, politics, and technology, Sowell does not miss much of how life was impacted on the conquered or the conquerors. By articulating the impact of policies on people locally and generally creates many powerful historical timeless lessons.

George Slade says

I have to give Sowell some credit. This dude does research like none other. I enjoyed this very interesting overview of some of the major cultural conquests of both sides of the world. Any true history buffs would enjoy this. It doesn't delve into minute details of each conquests, but you can definitely discover some new and intriguing subjects that you may want to look into further.

Adam Morva says

This is how history should be taught in schools.

Forget the nationalistic zeal, the provincialism, the ancestor worship, the boring bullshit or being anal about dates that is part and parcel of virtually every education system in the world when it comes to history. When Thomas Sowell teaches history he does it in an interesting way, demands and supports his pages with evidence, but most importantly, shows you what it means to be human.

John Martindale says

I listened to this audiobook a few years ago while riding up to Washington DC, it would definitely be worth listening to again. The primary thing I still remember is how Sowell didn't only write about the bad and the ugly, but also about good consequences of Empires. He says we should not do a "Cost/benefit analysis" and claim England for example was justified in her Empire building, because the goods that ultimately resulted in the nations conquered (the rule of law, stability, greater productivity, civilization, etc...) out weighed the terrible negatives. No matter how many good things result in the long run from England conquering much of the world, doesn't mean they had a moral right to do so, or even if one claimed they did, they they did everything right. But yeah, in a Liberal climate, it is political incorrect to even acknowledge that many places England conquered are now better off. Scotland for example was completely illiterate warring tribes, relentlessly butchering each other, a Scottish life at the time was "poor, nasty, brutish, and short". But once Scotland was conquered, it wasn't long until Scotland had some of the most prestigious universities in the world and was producing the greatest intellectuals. If it was not for the evil England expanding itself, there wouldn't have been an Adam Smith or a David Hume. But yeah, it was interesting.

Chris Csergei says

I was surprised by how good this book was, my opinion of it grew through out the entire book. Sowell does an excellent job of letting information, research, facts, data and actual events influence the emphasis and conclusion of this book. I learned numerous things that have been neglected by other scholars and writers more worried about proving their resumptptions about history. I was particular struck by the fact that more black African slaves were transport to the middle east than to the Americas, but we don't talk about them because most of them died or were never integrated into the culture. It is culture that seems to have the predominant effect of the long term success of a group of people, and culture is far more than simply race or nationality.

This book has something significant to contribute to our modern discussion on race relations, and makes it clear that our issues with race are neither unique or permanent, but may not be addressable in the way we think. I would recommend this book to anyone.

Charles says

Last month, in December 2016, maybe as a Christmas gift to himself, Thomas Sowell announced that he was retiring. Technically, he announced that he was retiring from writing a syndicated column, but at age 86, it seems likely that he does not intend to write any new books, either. This is unfortunate, but his work is done. There can be little doubt that Sowell's many works, taken together, by themselves would be adequate to educate someone raised by wolves on everything a person needs to know about economics, political economy, and much of history.

"Conquests And Cultures," first published nearly twenty years ago, is the third in Thomas Sowell's trilogy on the role of culture in world history (the others being "Race and Culture" and "Migrations and Cultures"). I have not read the other two; according to Sowell; they were originally one book which grew beyond its original scope and had to be split. Sowell here focuses on conquests, usually by force, as conquest has affected world cultures. In the earlier books, he focused not on force but on the effects of race and migration, although Sowell notes, of course, that history doesn't divide neatly into each bucket, so lines have to be drawn to guide analysis and discussion.

I was somewhat frustrated by this book. It's extremely well written, as one would expect from a Sowell work, it's interesting, and it conveys unbiased information in organized service of coherent themes. On the other hand, it covers such extensive ground through time and space that it feels sometimes like it's constituted of strung together bits of brief history about different areas of the world. Moreover, if you read enough of Sowell's culture/history books, many of the same themes tend to crop up as in other of his works, and that's true of this book. Frankly, most of the key elements of this book are contained in Sowell's 2015 book, "Wealth, Poverty, and Politics: An International Perspective," but with more pithiness and power in that book. I think, of Sowell's culture/history books (as opposed to ones relating to economics or to the analysis of political theory and practice), "Wealth, Poverty, and Politics" is best—it is the pinnacle of his work, a synthesis of everything. (The first edition, from 2015, is better than the second edition, from 2016.) The casual reader is probably best off just reading that book. That's not to say this book is bad—it's not. But of Sowell's culture/history books, it added the least to my store of knowledge, given what I had already read.

Sowell begins by laying out his framework. Really, he set himself a daunting task, because he basically proposes to provide both a history of the world in these three books, and a set of general explanations for

why things are the way they are. That's easy for a Marxist, or anybody else whose ideology offers easy answers to all ultimate questions. But Sowell is the very opposite—throughout his career he has hewed to the “constrained vision,” in which reality is what matters, perfection is impossible, and all choices involved tradeoffs. It's simple enough, at least for Sowell, with his command of the material, to defend his key explanation, that culture matters because it's the major determinant of human capital—that is, of behaviors of individuals and societies that create value, which behaviors collectively therefore largely determine the success of a society. But there are so many threads to culture and to human capital that, as I say, the task is daunting.

Nonetheless, Sowell manages it admirably. As he weaves his analysis and explanation throughout time and space, one theme is that he opposes both biological determinism and the idea that all people are the same in all ways that matter, such that what happens to them is due to external forces. “It is not racial or ethnic distinctions, as such, which have proven to be momentous but cultural distinctions, whether associated with race, with geographical origins, or with other factors. . . . The tendency to explain intergroup differences in a given society by the way that particular society treats those groups ignores the fact that differences between groups themselves have been the rule, not the exception, in countries around the world and down through history.” A second theme is that cultures necessarily change over time, due to diffusion, from conquest or otherwise—celebrating an idealized culture for itself is silly, since it is not the same culture as it was, and you are probably celebrating an imaginary thing, usually in service of some retrograde political or ideological ambition. A third theme is that, unlike migration, which tends to transfer those aspects of culture that adapt and work best, conquest can be either a net benefit or a net harm to the conquered (and always has some negative impact, basically by definition), by means of increasing or decreasing the human capital of the conquered. And throughout the book is the thread that while culture matters to a society's success, other things matter too, especially environmental factors (disease, geography, etc.)—but that none of those are deterministic either.

“Conquests and Cultures” examines four different cultures, elements of each of which experienced various forms of conquest (and conquered others): the British; the Africans; the Slavs; and Western Hemisphere Indians. The usual modern narrative of conquest mentions the first only in the context of Rome; doesn't mention the third except rarely and in specialist circles; and focuses on Africans and Indians, with a simplistic narrative of heroic, virtuous, happy, peaceful indigenous people brutally subjugated and exploited by the West. Sowell instead shows how conquest affected each culture, and elements within each culture, and offers a much more nuanced picture—including ascribing failed modern day cultures generally not to their earlier conquest, but to their own cultural failings. (In some ways this analysis is like Francis Fukuyama's later analysis, which suggests that the post-colonial path of countries depends largely on their pre-colonial structures, not on their colonial experience.)

As to the British, Sowell covers successive conquests—the Romans, various Germanic tribes, the Normans. He covers the Great Divergence—how Britain raced ahead of the world, without ascribing it to any one cause. But he notes that it's indisputable that by the 19th Century, Britain had developed enormous human capital, much of it derived from successfully integrating, after each conquest, elements of the conquering culture, without excessive destruction of the pre-existing society. England also integrated, through absorption, the best elements of immigrant cultures, and benefited from England's geographic position and features, such a water transport, a frequent Sowell theme. Most of this focuses on England proper, though—not Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, to which he then turns.

As to Wales, Sowell uses it to introduce another theme in the book—the differential impact of conquest depending on the degree and areas of control by the conquerors. “Where the conqueror has been more organizationally or technologically advanced, those portions of the conquered country which were

subjugated earliest and most thoroughly have tended to become—and remain—the most advanced regions, even in countries which later regained their independence.” To this day, much of Wales remains backward, and the more removed from English domination, the more backward. Sowell attributes this to Welsh culture, which lacks human capital, in that it is not entrepreneurial, but rather has created an educated class that “has a vested interest in promoting intergroup resentment and strife, using the symbols of identity and of historic oppression to gain current political ends, even at the expense of creating a climate unfavorable to either indigenous or foreign entrepreneurship.” Throughout the book, Sowell adduces many places around the world, generally with a history of colonialism, that have this same crippling defect.

Sowell contrasts Wales with Scotland—also partially conquered, and also very backwards in its unconquered areas, but which instead developed an open, entrepreneurial, can-do culture, at its peak in the Scottish Enlightenment, where a tiny, unpopulous country provided a startling number of advances and key thinkers in the building of the modern world.

Finally, Sowell flips the focus from conquests of Britain to Britain’s conquests of others. While he does not sugarcoat the evils of British imperialism, he clearly believes (as any sensible person does) that while Britain did not benefit economically overall from imperialism (sorry, Karl!), the beneficial impact in the long term on Britain’s colonies themselves was immense. For example, new technology brought by Britain immensely benefited food production everywhere the British ruled—and, just as importantly, the peace brought allowed the colonized peoples to grow food “in fertile but militarily indefensible areas where it would have been foolhardy to plant before. . . . More generally, confidence that an investment of labor and resources could claim its reward—whether at harvest time or when dividends were issued years later—has been crucial to the economic efforts which create national prosperity. . . . The security and stability provided by British colonial governments also made possible large-scale immigrations of foreign peoples”

And it wasn’t just food: “Freedom, wherever it exists in the world today, owes much to developments in Britain.” That is, in essence, the rule of law was given to British colonies, which are largely successful today to the extent they absorbed British culture, and thereby increased their human capital. Not to mention it was Britain, and Britain alone, that abolished slavery in much of the world, imposing its will wherever its rule held sway, another action that dramatically increased the ability of colonized cultures to increase their human capital. Implicit in this analysis, though, is that the pre-existing cultures were inferior to British culture, and improved by colonialism. That’s hard to dispute, or to dispute other than by shrieking “racist colonialist imperialist pig!”, but equally hard for people today, raised on a thin gruel of bogus “multiculturalism” and belief in the inherent virtue of primitive cultures, to accept. Not that Sowell cares; as always, he’s just looking for the truth, as it can be objectively demonstrated to all listeners.

Sowell next turns to Africa, or more precisely sub-Saharan Africa (he ignores the Maghreb, which seems to me to be a mistake, given that it would provide a counterpoint to Roman Britain). Here Sowell puts great emphasis on geography as a barrier to the growth of human capital (in contrast to Britain). Large areas of desert; few deep-water ports; terrain features; and most of all rivers generally unsuited for commercial use resulted in fragmented societies with little human capital, which meant an inability to resist both “territorial conquests and massive enslavement.” (Of course, most of the enslavement was either of Africans by each other, or of Africans selling each other to Westerners, more to Muslims than Europeans, though many millions to both.) Conquests, both internally, by Westerners, and by Arabs, brought benefits as well as horrors. Sowell focuses on differential human capital within Nigeria, brought about largely by differential impacts of British colonialism, in which different local cultures either were directly affected or not, and either took advantage of what the British had to offer or did not. But when the British left, despite civil war and corruption, Nigeria managed to hold on to much of the good things the British offered, thereby increasing the net human capital of the country. Sowell then evaluates Tanzania, Ghana and the Ivory Coast

through a similar lens.

Next, discussing the Slavs, Sowell further expands his analysis of human capital to note that using cultural transfers from Western Europe, the Slavs were able to advance their cultures far from their primitive beginnings—but always remained behind the rest of Europe in their human capital, as shown by their relative economic backwardness. Sowell evaluates the various cultures among the Slavs, their characteristics and their reactions to conquest (and their conquests of others). And Sowell finishes with the American Indians, in North and South America, similarly evaluating a variety of very different cultures within that broad grouping.

Sowell ends by summarizing not only this book, but his entire trilogy. He discusses “Differences In Wealth Production,” ascribing them, unsurprisingly, primarily to the human capital of each society. He notes that the reason that Western Europe recovered so rapidly after World War Two was not the Marshall Plan, though it helped accelerate the rebuilding, but that the human capital of those societies was extremely high and not destroyed. He trashes the theory that exploitation of colonized society by imperialist powers is the cause of the rampant failure among those post-colonial states, noting “if ‘exploitation’ theories were as widely applicable as supposed, then the dissolution of empires should lead to rising standards of living among the formerly conquered and presumably exploited peoples. Yet history repeatedly shows the opposite happening.” Similarly, when the Roman Imperium left Europe, societies decayed as the human capital left along with the Empire. “Once again, the mundane reality is that productivity creates wealth, so that trade with and investment in more productive countries is a far more important source of wealth than ‘exploitation’ of the Third World.”

Sowell also discusses “negative human capital”—that sometimes, or often (e.g., in Wales) the elites decide to use resentment for political advancement, which necessarily retards a society’s development and enhancement of human capital, since rather than focusing on what needs to be done and improved, the society tends to turn inward, reliving past alleged glories and focusing on supposed ways others have kept them down (or not so supposed, in some cases, but in any event the past is not something that can be changed). Similarly, when a rising society diverts the education of its elite by creating “soft-subject intellectuals,” such as lawyers, poets or devotees of Marxist theory, rather than experts in subjects such as medicine or engineering necessary to build cultural capital, bad things happen—especially, for example as in Malaysia, when a minority (the Chinese there) study hard topics and advance, while the majority indigenous people wallow in self-pity and identity studies.

Sowell concludes by sharply criticizing most current use of racism as an explanation for cultural differences, and in particular criticizing the deliberate failure to adequately define what racism is, and even worse, re-defining it in an incoherent and ahistorical way as to claim that racism is based on supposed power relationships. “That this new and self-serving escape hatch remained largely unchallenged has been one index of the level of moral intimidation surrounding racial issues. . . . In the ordinary sense of the word, minorities of all colors have shown themselves capable of as vicious racism as anybody, whether in or out of power.” “‘Racism’ as a blanket explanation of intergroup differences is not simply an over-rated explanation. It is itself a positive hindrance to a focus on the acquisition of human capital or cultural capital needed to rise economically and socially.” Sadly, such a message of personal and collective responsibility is even less popular today than when this book was written.

Sowell’s book is timeless; nothing in it is any less true or relevant than twenty years ago. In fact, Sowell’s book shows the folly of today’s American (and European) immigration policy, that admits large numbers of immigrants, without requiring them to submit to our culture and without inquiring whether their culture is inferior and should be, or elements of it should be, actively discouraged. The wave of migrants into

European countries today is a type of conquest of Europe, and as Sowell shows, such conquests can easily make the conquered permanently worse off (as with the American Indians). Sometimes the result of conquest is just a destruction of human capital, notably when a superior culture is conquered and then dominated by invaders. Of course, here it's only a conquest of those countries that have invited and accepted them (as opposed to brave countries like Hungary that have wisely stood up against the invading tide). The likely result unless Europe as a whole finds the will to resist will be a destruction of human capital on a massive scale, and a resultant fall in the quality of life of those societies. But, as Sowell shows, that won't be the first time such a thing has happened, although it'll be the first time it's happened on such a scale by a culture choosing suicide, rather than being conquered. Reading his book, however, should focus the attention of the open-minded on the need to evaluate the human capital of each culture, and not to assume that all cultures are of equal value, whether evaluating history, or the present day.

Phil says

This is the history book I have been looking for all my life. It provides studies of important cultures throughout history and interpretations with supporting rationale. It provides a conceptual framework to help me understand where humanity has come from with supporting details for the conclusions made. Thanks, Mr. Sowell, for your enormous effort to bring the facts together in an understandable way.

Rui says

Once again, I have to say, Thomas Sowell may be the greatest black man in American history.

Vaishali says

WOW ! Ok, stop whatever you are doing, grab this book and read the chapter on the Aztecs. My good God. Enough said. This is one of the few history books (possibly the only one) that I will revisit numerous times because of its copious amount of info and absolute clarity. Sowell is a true scholar who has woven an unbiased tapestry of human acculturation via conquest. There is so, so much in this book, although I wish he would have also thrown some light on ancient human civilizations in general and China in particular. Still, this book is well worth your time. Bravo!

Tim says

Keeping in mind that this is one out of a trilogy of books, it is an excellent partial survey of international history and the effects of conquests on cultures. Once again, Dr. Sowell makes the key and important distinctions that conventional (left-leaning) academics miss: points such as the fact that race and culture are two different things; cultures are not museum pieces to be cherished but are in fact behavioral patterns among groups that have varying degrees of success and varying degrees of moral and/or economic value; or for example that owning slaves and/or invading other peoples was not a practice exclusive to Europeans, but in fact were practices carried out around the world in many different cultures by virtually every race of people. These are just a few of the reasons to read this book, and learn what your public school teachers and

college professors so conveniently left out of their narrative of world history. Six stars, if I could.
