

***Historical Dynamics: Why States Rise and Fall***

**Peter Turchin**

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This fascinating and ambitious book presents a number of attempts to quantify and test theories of the growth and decline of political organizations over a time-span of many centuries. The author's ambition is to show that a rigorous quantitative theory of historical dynamics is possible — he calls it 'cliodynamics'. This involves expressing the underlying relationships in the form of differential equations and testing predictions against various kinds of historical data. Though the underlying philosophy is a little less novel than the author recognizes — quantitative macroeconomics with political and institutional variables is becoming increasingly fashionable — the book is rich in applications of the approach and full of illuminating historical material.

Three applications in particular are set out in detail. The most ambitious, by some margin, is a theory of the origin and growth of empires, which he calls the 'metaethnic frontier theory'. It is a particular kind of theory of collective action. Turchin argues that the political and social cohesion necessary to mount a successful imperial project does not come naturally but is the product of a prolonged period of close encounter between different ethnic groups. This increases social solidarity within each such group and increases its incentive to project political and military power outward in the conquest of rival groups. This does not mean, obviously, that all groups subject to intense interethnic rivalry become empire-builders (many are subjugated by their neighbours). But it does imply that successful empire-builders need to have been formed in a cauldron of ethnic rivalry at some earlier period. The theory is tested by means of dividing the history of Europe in the last two millennia into fifty cultural regions and twenty centuries, classifying each region according to the degree of ethnic rivalry (measured by linguistic, religious, economic and military criteria), and seeing whether a period as a 'frontier' region was followed by a period at the heart of an empire. Superficially at least the correlation is impressive — 45 regions out of 50 in the first millennium CE and 41 out of 50 in the second were either in the 'frontier then empire' or the 'no frontier then no empire' category. The classifications will doubtless be disputed, econometricians may be suspicious of such apparently clean univariate correlations and curious about the endogeneity of frontier status, and readers of all persuasions will wonder what omitted variables may be responsible for the findings. But there is no doubt that the theory is bold and imaginative, and will repay careful study.

Another application of quantitative historical dynamics is a theory of ethnic assimilation, deriving a logistic diffusion curve, which will not surprise historians of technology since many of the key features of ethnic identity can be considered kinds of technology for dealing with social life in the post-agricultural world. The real interest here is the testing of the theory on data — sketchy but intriguing — on conversion rates to Islam in medieval Iran and Spain. A third application looks at histories of growth and collapse of states due to the interaction of demographic evolution and changing fiscal strength. Intriguing as they are, all the applications raise difficult questions about both theoretical and empirical methodology: for one thing, are these theories alternatives or complementary explanations? For another, the choice of null hypothesis against which to test such theories can often seem casual. The author is frank in acknowledging the preliminary status of such work, both in the remarks made throughout the book and in the overview presented in the final chapter. In a book of this ambition there are bound to be many points of controversy. But for anyone interested in history, and anyone persuaded that quantification can add real insights to the imprecise assertions of historians of the 'longue durée', this book will provide exciting and very thought-provoking material.

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