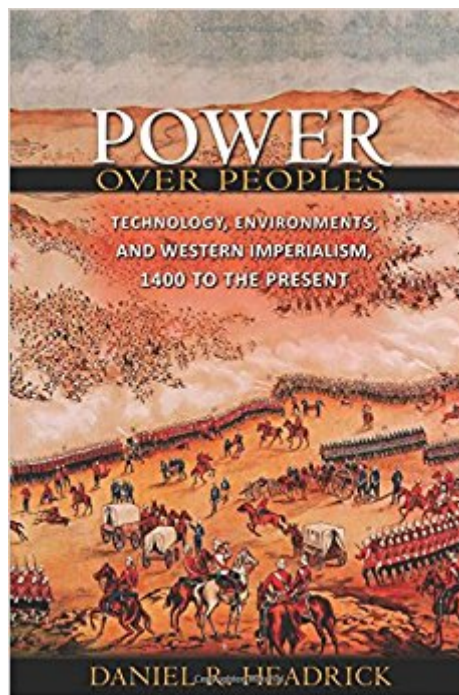




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# Power Over Peoples: Technology, Environments, And Western Imperialism, 1400 To The Present (The Princeton Economic History Of The Western World)



## Synopsis

For six hundred years, the nations of Europe and North America have periodically attempted to coerce, invade, or conquer other societies. They have relied on their superior technology to do so, yet these technologies have not always guaranteed success. *Power over Peoples* examines Western imperialism's complex relationship with technology, from the first Portuguese ships that ventured down the coast of Africa in the 1430s to America's conflicts in the Middle East today. Why did the sailing vessels that gave the Portuguese a century-long advantage in the Indian Ocean fail to overcome Muslim galleys in the Red Sea? Why were the same weapons and methods that the Spanish used to conquer Mexico and Peru ineffective in Chile and Africa? Why didn't America's overwhelming air power assure success in Iraq and Afghanistan? In *Power over Peoples*, Daniel Headrick traces the evolution of Western technologies--from muskets and galleons to jet planes and smart bombs--and sheds light on the environmental and social factors that have brought victory in some cases and unforeseen defeat in others. He shows how superior technology translates into greater power over nature and sometimes even other peoples, yet how technological superiority is no guarantee of success in imperialist ventures--because the technology only delivers results in a specific environment, or because the society being attacked responds in unexpected ways. Breathtaking in scope, *Power over Peoples* is a revealing history of technological innovation, its promise and limitations, and its central role in the rise and fall of empire.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Headrick destroys the simplistic notion that technological advances alone can explain the historic limits of Western global hegemony."--Choice

"For professional historians--and especially for those dealing with the events of the early modern and modern world and with the progress of technical advances most of the latest book by Daniel R. Headrick might seem like a comforting walk through a very familiar landscape. The road's main twists come as no surprise, but it is good to see them yet again, surveyed with a macroscopic perspective that captures all important features and, here and there, highlights interesting details."--Vaclav Smil, American Historical Review

"Daniel R. Headrick is right to think that insufficient attention has been paid to how technological change and environment shape imperialism, and his work is an excellent attempt to remedy that deficiency."--Peter Cain, The Historian

"This is an interesting, clearly-written, and well-researched book. In an era of academic specialization, it is also attractive for its willingness to tackle one of the largest and oldest questions of world history. While technology is the theme, the author carefully frames and qualifies his argument so as to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism. While this book should find a place in courses on economic history, the history of technology, and the economics of imperialism, its accessibility should also make it attractive to the reading public."--Robert E. Prasch, Journal of Economic Issues

"Headrick provides a magisterial and highly readable survey. . . . The work is perhaps most eye-opening in describing conflict in regions often left out of more sweeping accounts--colonial expansion in sub-Saharan west Africa or Algeria, or conflict in southern Latin America. . . . [T]his book will enable [historians] to understand the place of technology in broader narratives of change all the more effectively."--Paul Warde, Cultural and Social History

"[T]his is a major contribution from an important academic built on decades of experience. I am a better scholar for having read it, and chances are that you will be too."--James Daschuk, Environmental History Journal

"This is a major contribution to historical studies, as well as the study of technological change and economic history. Headrick asks a set of questions that are infrequently discussed, and analyzes them in an interesting way. This will be an important and widely cited book."--Stanley L. Engerman, University of Rochester

This clearly written and well documented book is a broad overview of the interaction between European (including the USA and some Latin American nations) imperialism and technological innovation. Headrick's basic point is that significant innovations in technology, frequently but not always weapons technology, played a crucial facilitating role in various phases of European

dominance of the globe. By the same token, limitations of technologies also defined the limits of European imperialism. Headrick covers the imperialism of the expansion of Early Modern Europe, the second great phase of Imperialism in the 19th century, and the 20th-21st century use of air power in some colonial and semi-colonial adventures. He is a thoughtful and knowledgeable analyst. While well written and generally informative, the major drawback of this book is that much of information will be known to even moderately knowledgeable readers. The advantages of European sailing vessels and cannon in the European entry into the Indian Ocean and Indonesian archipelago, the tactical advantages possessed by the Spanish conquistadors in the Western Hemisphere, the epidemiologic advantages of Europeans in the Americas and their disadvantages in Africa, and the role of the scientific/industrial revolution in 19th century imperialism are generally known well. The final part of the book, dealing with the ambiguous effects of air power in colonial adventures, is probably the most novel and interesting part of this book.

## Good Stuff

Once in a while, it is enjoyable to relive grand historic moments and refresh your general history knowledge. In particular, from a perspective, which may even claim to foretell the natural course of history. Professor Daniel Headrick examines the period of imperial conquests from the 15th century to present. His book describes the impact of European technological developments on the policies of European monarchs, states and, of course, the deeds and behaviour of people, who carried them out. In a catching narrative the author argues, that throughout the course of history, technological advances and know-how allowed to Europeans to get a power over nature, which was required to gain power over peoples. But not always. Striking victories, as that of Cortés in Central America, turned into draws or even defeats, for example, in case of Portuguese blue-water navies against brown-water navies in Asia in the course of 16th century, or the attempts to penetrate Africa for almost four hundred years. Headrick underlines, that the key to success was the ability of Europeans to capitalize on temporary advances in technology, but the role of human factors of conquerors, as it may seem at first glance, was not decisive. The technological gap, however, was not always large enough to continue imperial conquests. The power of the technology was ephemeral. Most notably, when the adversaries had begun to assimilate European tactics and to use their weapons; the use of horses by Indians, probably, being one of the best examples. The era of industrial revolutions, again provided new incentives for further expansions. However, technology alone, Headrick argues, could not secure lasting power over peoples. He quotes Mao Zedong, who

has said that: "Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive"(p.364).In some chapters, and in choosing the examples to prove his point, the author has been somewhat selective. The whole chapter is devoted to the role of steamboats in expanding European control over vast territories, at the same time nothing being said about railways. Last two chapters are devoted to air control and bombing raids, which, according to Headrick, "more often reinforced the targeted populations will to fight" (p.363). At the same time, the author does not pay any regard to the destructive power of the atomic bomb, which in a swift, though most cruel manner cowed into submission remaining belligerents at the end of the second world war. The author's conclusion at the end is really thought provoking. He says, that ever improving technology ensures that political and military defeats will come later, and at greater cost" (p.364), quoting Murray and Scales. One could partly agree. However, being aware, that the states, which own modern technologies, can also today win wars over peoples, which do not possess them, as effectively as did Cortés in Tenochtitlán. The difference is, that peoples are more interlinked than ever, which renders any act of barbarism in comparative and historical perspective of previous centuries, hardly imaginable. All in all, a very fascinating book, which enlarged my horizon about imperial conquests from the most interesting perspective.

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