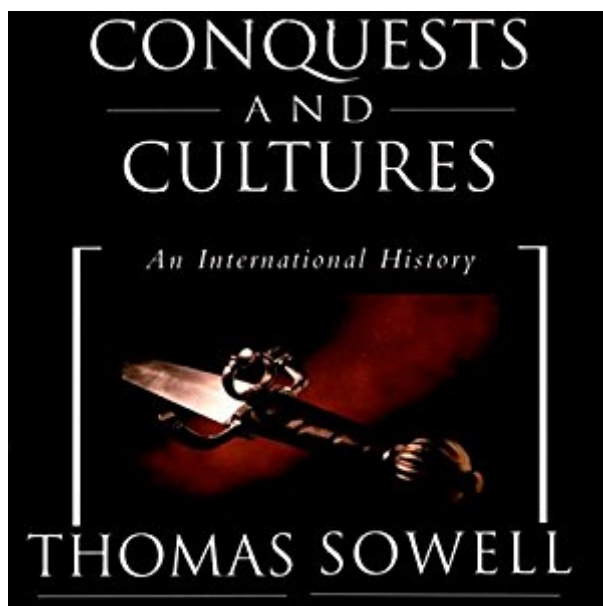


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Conquests And Cultures: An International History



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

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” (2016). 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 as 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.

This book is a good historical narrative, backed up with lots of data, a steady (definitely not shrill) sense of ethics and an understanding of the scope of human behavior. I think modern people look back at conquest and colonization, and tend to dismiss it as all equally evil, without much analysis. We sometimes even prefer to not talk about it. This does a disservice to understanding what actually happens. This book is a fascinating comparison of several different eras of conquest and colonization. I walked away with several great little lessons about history that are not at all obvious, among them: 1) When the imperial power withdraws, even peacefully, the colonies tend to become worse off, economically (and in some cases, much worse off). This is in part due to the exodus of human capital from the colony, and in part due to the retributions against those who stayed. Also,

good governance is really hard and utterly non-intuitive.2) Those pushing for independence from the colonial power tend to be natives newly-educated in the colonial power's system, while the locals who are least connected to the colonial power tend to be much more indifferent.3) Some imperial powers spread, culturally and militarily, because local groups don't hate them nearly as much as they hate their neighboring tribes. A lot of narrators, influenced by the idea of the noble savage, regularly skip this. Animosity between neighbors can be severe.4) There are many examples of groups of people, who, painfully aware of their backwardness, decided that enough was enough and that they were going to improve their lives. And some succeeded tremendously - as in the Scottish Enlightenment. Mr. Sowell argues that there are cases of people, disadvantaged by geography, history, and culture, who improve their lives far beyond what any sociologist or geographer would predict. I am not a historian, so I lack the specialization to deeply evaluate each case study in his narrative. But as a person who likes to read history, I found this readable, full of data, and persuasive. As a side note, Mr. Sowell's writes about "negative human capital", which is very interesting, and deserving of more attention. I do not know if he originated the idea.

Sowell does a tour de force of the human history of the populated continents showing how climate, land forms, religious beliefs, and chance influenced the way human societies developed in various parts of the world. His thesis is probably open to question as any reference to historical trends would be, but he offers sound reasoning and facts for his conclusions. I was greatly enlightened, as I have been by all of Dr. Sowell's books.

Excellent book by the good Doctor. Not a light read but chock full of goodies and worth the time. Discloses the ignorance surrounding the "Slave" issues and the grievance industry.

I was afraid that this book would be a bit dry, but it isn't. Dr. Sowell keeps it interesting--no fascinating!

Brilliant!!! Easy reading of complex issues yielding a fresh understanding as to why peoples and countries developed into what they are and not how individual with especial interests and ulterior motives would like others to believe.

Wow. What a treat to read from such a high caliber author. I picture myself on the knee of grampa Smith (Adam Smith) when reading the works of Thomas Sowell. (I would love to become like that!)

This and Basic Economics are fun to read, yet so incredibly instructional. This set of Sowell's books makes it clear why he had such a wealth of knowledge to draw from for his "Basic Economics" works. [Basic Economics 4th Ed: A Common Sense Guide to the Economy](#). Thanks Dr. Sowell.

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