

**Frank Jacob and Gilmar Visoni-Alonzo. *The Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe. A Revision.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-137-53917-5**

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In their text, Jacob and Visoni-Alonzo offer a revision of the concept of military revolution in early modern Europe. However, the scope of their reflections reaches far beyond this epoch and region. Everything is centered around the explanation of the position of hegemony obtained by the European or Western world over the other continents. This is regarded as a form of military superiority resulting from a revolution in military affairs. The authors state that they are “aware that [their] thesis stands in contrast to everything that has been written ... in recent years” (1). Unfortunately, although their claims about the concept may be correct, they do not provide a solid justification for this paradigm shift.

The authors claim that the concept of “military revolution,” an idea that has spread in many different directions and has been used in the study of many different historical situations, is probably no longer a helpful or useful theoretical tool and has lost the ability to typify historical differences. “Military revolution” has typically been used as a synonym to describe mere military change or innovation. The authors’ “short survey of the debate on Military Revolution” (6) shows that the concept has evolved in such a way as to become essentially self-destructive.

Nevertheless, the “Eurocentric assumptions” found in a concept that was “supposed to help explain the dominance of the West in the age of colonialism” represent the first accusation leveled against it. The role that this concept has come to play as an anchor for the global explanation of world history was not at all clear when the famous Roberts Conference took place in 1955, although the movement from the European to the global scale undoubtedly occurred afterwards. The authors maintain that the concept should not be used at all, as it is biased in nature and carries with it the idea that only a few cultures are capable of fighting according to the rules of discipline and with the best technology.

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They sensibly state that “we have to be very careful when we determine something as revolutionary.” (4) However, the brief notes that they provide about the use of the word “revolution” are banal and are concentrated exclusively in the political domain. There is no mention of the use of the concept in other areas, for example, in the phrase “industrial revolution,” where it could probably offer some clarification about the overuse of the concept of military revolution that becomes a fashion. A reader may become gradually more apprehensive as we find statements about “‘revolutions’ in pop music” (4), about “human beings” that “have always tried to kill each other” (5), or when we find a poor definition of war as a “concept” that has “never changed with regard to its aims” (5), or when we read about “immutable” truth (5) These are not questions of style nor is it a side issue: it lies at the very center of the “revision” that the authors propose. We find it in the hidden “theory” that supports the “naturalization” of the dissemination of technological innovation or in the reference to the lack of political unity in Asia or America against colonial aggression.

The authors seek to demonstrate that the influence of European states on other continents cannot be explained by the effects of a “military revolution.” The core argument is that the “relationship between superior technology and European supremacy was not always evident” (36).

Jones and Visoni-Alonzo search for other explanations, Machiavelli is brought into play, in order to lend greater depth to the argument of the “disunity” in the “colonial sphere” (43). However, this invocation of the Florentine author requires an explanation. Can we say that Cortés and Pizarro were “Machiavellian heroes” (36)? Their historical experience—the communication between large-sized continental human cultures, ignoring everything about the others—is singular, in the strictest sense of the word.<sup>2</sup> The results of Cortés and Pizarro’s actions in America were unpredictable and we do not know if they can be raised above the status of banal practitioners of massive violence. Only in this sense could they be considered agents of a crude form of Machiavellian *virtù*.

In Asia, technological backwardness was not the reason for Western rule. The Indian “enemies” of the Portuguese “were anything but weak and unprepared” (38). The societies that the European powers attempted to subordinate were not frozen in time. Their leaders were looking for the indispensable technological and tactical changes that were needed in military matters. “Instead of calling [the action of Ranjit Singh] the Indian

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<sup>2</sup> We can presume that the genocide of other unknown peoples in North America, Siberia, and Oceania was no different, other than it took place with populations of other sizes.

Military Revolution, we ought rather to accept that the recognition of a military threat leads to a process of research and development [...] to overcome the gap with the enemy army” (41-42). It is not clear where lies the difference. Astonishingly, the authors say “we can trace at least a partial Military Revolution in India” and identify training as the crucial factor behind British military success in India (42).

We are forced to imagine the presence here of a hidden theory about adaptation to something perceived as environmental challenges. This is a crucial point in this book. History is dissolved into a soup of fixed common-sense perceptions about the purpose of war. . Demonstrating that armies were not always formed for the purpose of being victorious seems absurd but it is possible. However, seems to suffice to bear in mind that, not so long ago, maintaining standing armies during peacetime was considered an absurdity; nor should we forget that a great number of military actions have not always been undertaken in order to be decisive, but for political immediate and even futile reasons.

As we see, the authors propose shifting the answer to the question of the explanation of inequality inherent to colonization from a technological adaptation to an explanation lying in the political sphere. They talk of “rivalries and tensions” and the “Machiavellian ability to strike alliances of convenience” (40) so that “Western supremacy in India, as in America, was consequently built on the disunity that existed in the colonial sphere itself” (43). After the condemnation of “military revolution” as a Eurocentric concept, is it not possible to see here the revival of a traditionalist theme? People outside Europe (and other “Western” states, including Japan) were unable to present a “unified” front to the aggressor. But we wonder who these entities were that were disunited and if they were aware of this disunity.

It is probably a good idea to abandon the use of the concept of “military revolution,” as it has spread in too many directions and has become identical to plain military change. However, a revolution is much more than simply a series of technological improvements and the social consequences must be placed at the top of the list of its effects. The study of other uses of the notion of revolution (as in the term “industrial revolution,” for example) is a good way of arriving at a decision about the use of the concept. However, this book does not go in that direction. Paradoxically, another anachronistic prejudice, disunity, incapacity of political organization facing aggression has replaced the one that was expelled, that of inability of matching technological innovation.