



Western Empires, Christianity, and the Inequalities between the West and the Rest, 1500–2010

Sampie Terreblanche

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Reviewing this book was a daunting task, not only due to its immense length but also because of the complexity and importance of the content. In a sense, this book is a development of Terreblanche's influential *The history of inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*, which was published in 2002. This time, the emphasis is very much on global histories with an intricate analysis of the links between industrialisation in the west and the economies of the rest of the world.

The starting point is captured in the title of the first chapter, "Reasons for the rise of the Western world in the centuries after 1500". The book continues with discussions of different western empires, profiling such forms of imperialism as maritime empires, slavery and settler colonialism, and the basis of western capitalism's growth in raw materials from conquered territories. Do not expect a great deal on South Africa in this book as the author's focus is far broader than that. It is a study of imperialism on a grand scale.

It is, however, not a broad-brush or superficial approach. The analysis is extremely detailed and based on an extraordinary amount of reading. For example, there is an intricate analysis of the impact of the two world wars

of the last century; he refers to the 1914–1945 period as the "thirty-one years' war". The book closes with three impressive chapters on decolonisation, postcolonial empires (primarily that of the USA), and the emergence of what he calls "undemocratic capitalism" and growing "domestic inequality".

The book has several merits. It is encyclopaedic in its scope. It can both be read as a comprehensive study and consulted as one might an encyclopaedia. It includes, for example, very useful discussions of the early histories of countries such as China and Spain, whose empire spawned a number of states in South America.

It reinforces my belief that the study of economic history, and indeed history in general, is sadly vulnerable in South Africa and elsewhere. This is manifested in its neglect in schools and in much of higher education, where research can be conducted by social scientists with an abysmal ignorance of the past. For example, many young South Africans and even senior academics did not know who Cecil Rhodes was prior to the university protests in 2015.

Terreblanche does us a major favour by demonstrating how important it is to dispel some of this ignorance. He also shows the need to combine the insights of his own academic territory (economic history) with other fields in the social sciences and beyond.

It is often said that the pursuit of knowledge should be carried out with an inter-disciplinary lens. This book is a good example of the benefits of such an approach. Most importantly, the book is a valuable contribution to the study of globalisation, not least because it shows that its roots go back much further in time than is often thought.

I do have a couple of quibbles. One is that the discussion of Christianity is not as substantial as the title would suggest. David Livingstone's role is not dealt with at all and Max Weber's important study of the links between Protestantism and capitalism is not even referenced, although it is clear that Terreblanche knows of it (p 10). Also, much of the world subjected to capitalism and colonialism, such as the Indian subcontinent, did not adopt Christianity but adhered to other faiths. The other quibble is the author's invention of "restern" in opposition to "western". It seems quite sufficient to speak of "the west and the rest", as in the title.

I recommend this book very strongly as an impressive contribution to the study of how the world has become what it is today. I hope it will convince those who believe there is no place for the study of history to think again. [NA](#)