Jenks on Lambert, 'Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires, and the Conflict that Made the Modern World'

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This study commences with an important distinction. Sea power is the strategic projection of naval power by any state capable of producing it. Seapower, in Lambert’s view, is a cultural nexus of economic, political, and diplomatic perspectives that has allowed certain states to fashion themselves into powers of global influence. States that have projected sea power include the contemporary United States, the USSR, and Imperial Germany. Seapower states are found in the histories of Athens, Carthage, Venice, the Dutch Republic, and Britain. It is to this latter group that Lambert’s study attends.

Given the originality of his argument, Lambert includes as an appendix an aide-mémoire listing the fifteen necessary attributes of cultural seapower. (It is quite helpful, and many readers may want to start there, pp. 330-331.) The lengthy list notwithstanding, the fundamental elements of seapower identity are clearly its deliberately chosen nature, its inclusive politics, its focus on maritime trade networks and dynamic taxation, and the importance of a constabulary approach to naval operations. Elements of these are visible in the sea states that emerged after 2000 BCE in symbiosis with the continental land empires of the eastern Mediterranean. Thus did the Minoans and Phoenicians rise to some prominence alongside ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt by servicing those empires’ significant need for metals, timber, and maritime alliances. The relationship was vexed, however, due to what Lambert identifies as an existential threat. Trade was a conduit for raw materials, but it could also be a conduit for threatening new ideas. Moreover, people who enriched themselves through independent trade stood outside the patronage-based hierarchies of a monarchical system.

These tensions are powerfully revealed in Lambert’s look at Athens, the first state in which the seapower model was realized, and the first with discernibly imperial ambitions. In contrast to the universal monarchies of Persia, whose economies were tributary, extractive, and agricultural, the Athenians enriched themselves with a seaborne trade that was dynamic, productive, and commercial. And which, most importantly, relied upon consumers and occupational stakeholders in the demos. The arrival of the trireme—an expensive vessel of war—required the creation of tax-based empire capable of generating the funding. The extension of taxes required the extension of political rights, and the need to protect sea lanes for private maritime trade was assumed by a state navy.
Democracy, trade, and empire were now locked in a powerful, self-reinforcing formula. These are the contexts in which Lambert suggests we need to understand the Peloponnesian War and the Delian League (the allied league that the Athenians created in order to raise contributions for naval defense). To make this argument requires Lambert to tease out the polemical perspectives of Thucydides and Herodotus, which renders the chapter quite historiographically engaging.

Although he is proposing the existence of a type, Lambert recognizes significant and important variations in his examples. Carthage, for instance, stands as the curious example of seapower state that was reluctant about its aspirations to empire. This was partly the result of Carthage’s internal political tensions, in which mercantile and seafaring interests faced off against an aristocratic agricultural interest in the hinterland. That internal political dynamic was not unique; the tension was fundamental to seapower statehood. But it was resolved differently in different places, and in Carthage these tensions played out in the Punic Wars, in which Carthage made half-hearted, almost defensive efforts to stave off the threat of Roman sea power to their burgeoning empire. Rome played a harder game, and in Lambert’s telling, was fundamentally concerned with the existential threat: “Rome deliberately set out to annihilate seapower culture, an act of policy reflecting a profound fear of inclusive politics and maritime trade” (p. 103). The nature of the Roman animus was powerfully expressed in their decision to burn (rather than appropriate) the five hundred vessels of the Carthaginian fleet in the Second Punic War, and the thoroughness of the sack of Carthage in the Third Punic War. The Romans sought to remove all assertions of Carthaginian maritime cultural supremacy. That goal, in a city that had been designed around the sea-sheds of the great circular harbor, required extensive destruction.

A strength of the book is its attention to the cultural projection of seapower identity. While present-day Venice is a tourist culture organized around the gondola, Lambert points out that this is practically a parody of an earlier seapower culture that grew out of the domination of the galley. The ceremony and architecture of late medieval Venice emphasized maritime identity—most notably in the Arsenale, a state-funded galley warship-building factory so impressive it gave its name to an institutional type. The use of galley convoys and protected trade routes allowed Venice to lever an advantageous trade from the continental land empires to which it was contiguous: the Habsburgs and Byzantines (and later, the Ottomans). Ceremonial was of great significance in Venice, for it was the primary way in which the oligarchy demonstrated inclusive politics and gained “the consent of the lower orders” (p. 129). Technological commitment to the galley doomed its empire, as “the end of the commercial galley trade meant Venice no longer generated expert oarsmen” (p. 138). The republic’s political settlement thus fractured, and capital was increasingly invested in the landed hinterland (from which it had previously been statutorily diverted). A long period of “managed relative decline” (p. 155) followed (and was soon to be seen in the examples of the other modern seapower states). Lambert calls Venice the first modern seapower state, attributing its revival of the type after a millennium of absence to the state’s unique classical inheritance. For one result of resisting papal overlordship was the freedom to peruse the “heathen” texts in which the seapower model was faithfully transmitted.

Lambert’s consideration of the Dutch Republic—his fourth example—is arresting, for he makes the case that it was only a seapower state for twenty years. From 1653 to 1672, Johann de Witt’s True Freedom movement put in place the policies necessary for seapower. But the Dutch failed in their attempt at seapower synthesis, and largely for structural reasons. The republic’s decentralized
political structures permitted too much power for the agriculturalists of the interior, whose military priority was understandably directed toward taking defensive measures against the armies of Louis XIV. Mercantile interests lost their brief effort to launch a nationally directed "New Navy" when the Stadholder was restored, and the entire project in commercially oriented economic and defense policy came to an end. The Dutch had failed in a fundamental challenge: overriding the objections of a land-based aristocracy.

England is perhaps the most well-known example of a polity that balanced mercantile commercial agendas and the interests of aristocracy. Here Lambert manages to avoid suffering from the repetition of themes and dynamics necessarily becoming familiar to the reader. This is largely because he devotes significant attention to the decline of England’s seapower status—or, as he sees it, its shift from being a “seapower state” back into a vestigial “sea state.” Imperial Germany is less of the bogeyman in this account than readers might expect. Rather, the role of nemesis is taken by the United States. The First World War, as ever, played a pivotal role. It is the adoption of conscription in 1916 that stands for Lambert as the act that proved the precepts of seapower statehood were being abandoned. In committing to a continental war, England entered into a thirty-year crisis of financial and imperial overextension.

Given the scale of the overall argument, Lambert must be credited for including chapters which strengthen it by considering counterexamples. Primarily this requires a look at the “sea states” that never rose to full seapower status (Rhodes, Genoa), and overseas empires (Portugal) which, while they had maritime components, never developed the crucial nexus that Lambert requires. While ancient Rhodes had many of the seapower attributes, it was ultimately just not powerful enough to assert an independent diplomacy. Medieval Genoa was similarly curtailed, certainly in comparison to Venice. It lacked inclusive government, failed to escape the hegemony of Habsburg Spain, and became an essentially mercenary contractor of its maritime services. A full chapter is devoted to the Russia of Peter the Great, and the time is well spent. Best of all the examples, it shows the distinction between a land power’s projection of sea power and the seapower synergy. Peter was zealous in the support of the navy that he founded and the modernization that he jump-started. But Lambert acquits him of the charge of seeking seapower status—partly because his instinctive absolutism would not allow it, but mostly because he recognized the limitations posed by Russia’s fundamentally continental nature.

This is global history, if only (as Lambert admits) from the familiar Eurocentric territory of “the West.” Scholars of empire will be interested in the way Lambert navigates the concept of empire, particularly his distinction between overseas empire and seapower identity. Since his model explains the growth of global trade and democratic political development as well as accounting for important wars, his subtitle assigns it responsibility for the creation of the modern world. And indeed, he grants it central importance in the creation of the Western order. That Western order is presently restructuring in the face of an unclear US-China relationship, and the final pages of the book are devoted to some thoughts in this area.

Overall, the result is a thought-provoking work with much to offer scholars in many areas. For this reviewer the question raised concerns Lambert’s explanatory approach and its claim to universality. Specialists of eighteenth-century Britain (like myself), having a long familiarity with the patterns of Britain’s blue water strategy, will easily recognize the analogic elements in the non-British examples.
to which Lambert draws attention. Given that Lambert’s point of scholarly origin is the same, one wonders to what degree the British example informed the definition of the universal type, and whether some distortions may result. This is a larger question, related to Lambert’s call for explorations of the question in non-Eurocentric areas, but it is an important one. And the answer will condition the long-term influence and legacy of this interesting book.


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