BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Lambert, 2018, ***Seapower States. Maritime Culture, Continental Empires, and the Conflict that Made the Modern World*****, Yale University Press, UK, 427 pages, ISBN***:* 9780300240900

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In approaching the fundamental processes of endurance and change in a chaotic international setting, Lambert's work is, first and foremost, daring, with its arguments – and, occasionally, the way they are brought together – sure to generate intense debates and disagreements in some quarters. Early on in the work, the author argues that Mahanian sea power belongs to the West "a consortium of liberal, democratic commercial states that trade globally, and act collectively to secure oceanic trade against pirates, conflict and instability" (p.7), with the crucially different "seapower identity" being found in a number of polities such as Britain, Denmark, Japan and Singapore. This, in effect, represents the book's central argument, whereby "Mahan's phrase 'sea power', which describes the strategic options open to states possessing navies, shifts the meaning of the original Greek word from identity to strategy, weakening our ability to understand seapower as culture." (p.7) Lambert thus argues that seapower in the ancient Greek context (*thalassokratia*) refers to states dominated by the sea, in effect "cultural seapowers", rather than states which possessed large navies. At the same time, the core of his thesis is that seapowers were dependent on mobilising the full range of human and fiscal resources, and by various forms of inclusive political systems (such as oligarchic republics), which

enabled such polities to compete against continental imperial polities, who were, Lambert argues, rigid, militaristic, focused on a centralised political system and a command economy, and who feared the subversive potential of seapowers.

Thus, the struggle between various seapower republics and continental hegemons is not only seen from a geopolitical standpoint, but also as a long-running series of cultural battles, dealing with identity and values (p.10). As long as seapowers were able to make use of their strengths to maintain a balance in the international system, they were able to prosper. It was in the change of the distinctive weapons of the seapower states that the seeds of disaster could ultimately be found. Therefore: "Seapowers that attempted to wield the weapon of continental might, mass military mobilisation – the Dutch Republic between 1689 and 1713, and Britain from 1916 to 1918 – were destroyed by the effort, even if they 'won' the war. Only continental powers use navies to advance total-war strategies of annihilation or unconditional surrender. This strategic model, employed by Rome, was Mahan's legacy to the United States. Rome possessed strategic sea power, but neither Rome nor the United Sates were seapowers." (p.15) Moreover, the author justifies his decision on focusing solely on the European dimension of seapower – rather than engaging with other non-European states with maritime traditions – due to his wish for the work to be read as "the collective study of a coherent, interrelated group of seapower states, states that were acutely and overtly conscious of the intellectual heritage left by their precursors", going back to the Athenian invention of thalassocracy via the Minoans "to avoid the stigma of having been the first such state and to obscure a profound debt to the Phoenicians" (p.16).

The book's first – and possibly most important – chapter deals with the creation of seapower identity, pitting the seapower polities of the Eastern Mediterranean against the cosmocratic claims of Mesopotamian empires. In what functions as arguably the most important distinction of the book – which is encountered, with varying degrees, in subsequent chapters – Lambert paints a picture of static imperialism and restless seapower dynamism. In his vision, the Egyptian and Mesopotamian polities, "constrained by regions, river based, hemmed in by desert and mountains" and with political heartlands distant from the ocean, defined political success according to domestic stability and territorial conquest,

while their geography added to a sense of exceptionalism and superiority (p.18). Whereas such states pursued universal monarchies, "pedestrian prospects and military solutions", whereas seapower states favoured innovation, exploration, compromise and balance. The Phoenician polities which favoured seapower thus represent distinct, innovative, prosperous societies, with the great city of Tyre being the most representative. At the same time, the Tyrian "'maritime imperial' model" – albeit destroyed by the return to prominence of continental actors – would be encountered in the much more ambitious policies of later seapowers, thus reflecting "enduring economic and strategic realities." (p.34). Among these, one encounters the militaristic dimension added by the Greeks to the existing Phoenician model.

Accordingly, the second chapter focuses on the Athenian thalassocratic experiment, which – in Thucydides' critique of democracy, imperialism and seapower – quickly led to its transformation from heroic city-state to a democracy which was, nonetheless, an imperial tyrant for other Greek city-states (p.70). Just as the dynamic, democratic Athens was seen a major military and cultural threat by continental Sparta and Persia, the Carthaginian seapower state – "an obvious precursor of Venice, and Britain" (p.83) – would be later seen as a deadly enemy by the Romans, with chapter 3 focussing on the cultural war between a defensive, compromise-oriented Carthage and an aggressive, militaristic Rome. The next chapter deals with the way in which Venice "introduced seapower to the West as an intermediary between two worlds, and two epochs" (p.131). The successor to the extraordinary Venetian state is found in the next chapter, dealing with the brief Dutch moment of focus towards seapower, a prosperous republic in a world of monarchies. Chapter six, in turn, looks at Rhodes, Genoa, and Portugal, with Lambert explaining how each of them, while dependent on fleets, did not possess a true seapower culture, with even Portugal retaining "an aristocratic terrestrial culture, where blood and land mattered far more than the undignified business of seafaring trade" (p. 222), with the sea acquiring an important place in Portuguese culture only in the late 19th century (p.225). And whereas navies may become the tools of autocracies – as demonstrated in the chapter dealing with Peter the Great's ambition – maritime culture is a different thing altogether. This was certainly the case in

England, which first embraced seapower under Henry VIII (p.269), with the commercial classes later becoming committed to seapower since they feared the return of a Catholic dynasty (p.276). Thus, "between 1688 and 1945, Britain worked within a multi-polar state system to prevent the creation of successive universal monarchies in Europe, sustaining anti-hegemonic coalitions with money and naval might, which compensated for military weakness" (p.289). That Britain ceased being a strategic seapower after 1945 was mainly due to American policy, which actively worked to end Britain's dominance of global trade and to dismantle its imperial system (pp.303-307). Chapter nine discusses the role and importance of seapower today, arguing that, despite their vast resources and naval potential, states such as China, and even the United States – with the most powerful fleet in human history –, are not seapowers. The European Union is also briefly considered as a negative example, "an unaccountable protectionist system that has impoverished and infantilized most member states, to the advantage of German industry, in order to integrate old, culturally diverse nations into a homogenised monolith, […] in danger of becoming a *Zollverein* for the twenty-first century", or even "an empire, not a nation, closer to Russia and China than the liberal democratic nation states that are the legacy of seapower" (p. 319).

A discussion of the book's ideas must firstly take into account the scope and ambition of such a work. One cannot escape the feeling that, in choosing to tell the story of innovative, restless, dynamic cultures which favoured trade rather than the militarist, hegemonic, static monocultures associated with states pursuing the symbol of world monarchy, the author has created a somewhat deterministic scheme, which threatens to break, rather than gracefully bend under the weight of contingency, individual agency, and the many other factors which led to the choices made by continental and coastal polities in shaping their own cultures, not least in their strategic vision concerning various rivals and allies. In approaching the subject as the history of an idea, Lambert skilfully integrates history, politics, economics, strategy, and art in the story of a process which contributed to the rise of modernity. It is often an illuminating synthesis, even as some of the author's conclusion will be forcefully challenged by various experts. Whether it has to do with the impact of Greek militarism on seapower,

the defensive and inclusive nature of Carthaginian politics (when compared to the Rome), or the alleged constant fear that continental hegemons have had towards free, seapower republics which challenged their political culture and societies, issues will not only be raised with regards to the overall argument, but also regarding the way in which the author has interpreted decisions made by historical figures such as Hannibal or De Witt, who he almost turns into seapower agents of freedom, fighting against despotic continental regimes – who are portrayed as possessing monocultural ambitions, levelling of differences, aggressiveness, closed mindsets, and apparently little else. It is an unfortunate simplification which lessens the persuasive power of an otherwise intriguing work.

Audacious in its breadth and scope, as well as in its polemical spirit, the book remains a flawed, fascinating intellectual exercise. Regardless of one's position regarding the author's conclusions, it represents a very important read, particularly in the current international climate, defined as it is by Western retrenchment, the decline of globalisation as we know it, and, more ominously, the reimagining of what constitutes freedom.