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Book review:

*Conquest: How Societies Overwhelm Others* by David Day.  
New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008

*Conquest* is a remarkable exemplification of the beauty of history. I shall start by saying that this is a beautifully written book and I find it hard to put it down. Reading this book is an experience akin to sailing around the globe, from Mexico to Japan, ancient to contemporary. David Day, an accomplished Australian historian, has before written a book on how the residents of Australia have claimed to and successfully established proprietorship of the land (*Claiming a Continent*, 1996, revised edition 2001, HarperCollins), and *Conquest* is an enormous expansion, both geographically and theoretically. Through numerous cases, often in a vivid and engaging way, Day illustrates that human history has been marked by waves of land intrusions and takeovers by a group of people on another.

The central argument is that the old language of colonialism should be replaced by that of “supplanting societies,” which means a group of people move onto another group’s land and secure the proprietorship of that land. As Day explains, colonialism does not necessarily indicate the occupation of the land of a society by another, and it tends to mislead by giving the impression that the occupation of land came to an end when the European and American powers had, for the most part, withdrawn from Asia and Africa by the middle of the twentieth century. The new paradigm proposed by Day is meant to move beyond the historical context of colonialism and to view the land intrusion as a never-ending struggle. Through the new lens, we are able to compare land takeovers throughout history and understand them better.

The whole book is organized around three stages of land occupation: (1) making a legal claim to the land, (2) making a claim of effective proprietorship over the land, and (3) establishing a claim of moral proprietorship over the land (p. 7-9). The first stage involves symbolic acts, such as raising a flag or collecting rocks. However, single claimants are rarities, and a supplanting society usually has to make a claim of effective proprietorship, which goes beyond symbolic acts and includes acts such as peopling the land, producing maps, exploring the resources, and fortifying the borders. The last stage is a subtler one, which involves morally justifying the invasion and raising a feeling of national pride.

In this sweeping book, Day tells us numerous stories, many of which are less familiar to readers in the West, such as Japan's intrusion of the Ainu society in Hokkaido, Japan's invasion of Korea, and Russia's takeover of Siberia. Some are still happening and more relevant than ever, such as the turbulent history of Tibet and the politics surrounding the United States-Mexico border.

*Conquest* is a less polemic book than *Claiming a Continent*, as Day tries to maintain a neutral tone and avoids moral judgments for or against supplanting societies, although readers, in particular those not familiar with history, will likely find many stories disturbing.

My minor complaint, or quibble rather, is that Day does not offer an explanation for supplanting societies. Day seems to assume that societies have a natural and perennial tendency to supplant other societies and stops right here. While offering many fascinating narratives, Day never tells us what propels a society to invade another. Indeed, social scientists have told us that there are a set of mechanisms behind wars and land takeovers, such as taxing, population growth, geography, and even national mentality, and I believe that this body of literature could have shed great light on *Conquest*. However, a book should not be judged by what it does not set out to do, and Day should be congratulated for what he has already accomplished in this book.

*Conquest* draws from and contributes to many literatures. Not only will it be on the list of "must reads" for historians, it will stimulate discussions from sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and political scientists as well. A *tour de force*.

### **Citation**

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