



Rethinking History

The Journal of Theory and Practice

ISSN: 1364-2529 (Print) 1470-1154 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrhi20>

Foundations of Modernity. Human Agency and the Imperial State

Isabel DiVanna

To cite this article: Isabel DiVanna (2014) Foundations of Modernity. Human Agency and the Imperial State, *Rethinking History*, 18:1, 141-144, DOI: [10.1080/13642529.2013.812848](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2013.812848)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2013.812848>



Published online: 03 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 101



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

- Age.” In *Networks in the First Global Age, 1400–1800*, edited by Rila Mukherjee, 11–32. Delhi: Primus.
- Dohrn-van Rossum, Gerhard. 1996. *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldstone, Jack A. 1998. “The Problem of the ‘Early Modern’ World.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (3): 249–284.
- Le Goff, Jacques. 1960. “Temps de l’Église et temps du marchand.” *Annales* 15 (3): 417–433.
- Lieberman, Victor. 1993. “Local Integration and Eurasian Analogies: Structuring Southeast Asian History, c.1350–c. 1830.” *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (3): 475–572.
- Lieberman, Victor. 1997. “Special Issue: The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland South East Asia, 1400–1800.” *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (3).
- Ludden, David. 1994. “History Outside Civilization and the Mobility of South Asia.” *South Asia* 17 (1): 1–23.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 1997. “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia.” *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (3): 735–762.
- Van der Veer, Peter. 1998. “The Global History of ‘Modernity’.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (3): 285–294.
- van Schendel, Willem. 2002. “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (6): 647–668.

Rila Mukherjee

Institut de Chandernagor, India

Email: rila.mukherjee@gmail.com

© 2013 Rila Mukherjee

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2013.812849>

Foundations of Modernity. Human Agency and the Imperial State, by Isa Blumi, New York, Routledge, 2012, xvi + 271 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-88464-8

Isa Blumi’s new book is a remarkable attempt to deconstruct currently-held – if not universally accepted – ideas about the birth of modernity, relating the emergence of the modern world to the developments of nineteenth-century imperialism.

As first glance, it would seem like the approach, militantly non-Eurocentric, keen to reject the mainstream narrative of incorporation, adaptation and, generally speaking, submerging of identities into a coherent and stable national narrative, is neither completely successful nor original. Quite a lot of the introductory pages – chapters, even – of this book are devoted to placing our interest on empire and on human agency in a post-9/11 context, whereby the ‘other’ has become more visibly anti-Modern than ever before. But as the argument unfolds, and the use of evidence in supporting an argument for diversity, non-adaptation, and resilient identity in the face of adversity becomes clearer, the reader is led to a refreshingly new understanding of the history of

empire and a reconsideration of the compelling, liberal narrative of nationalism. Ultimately, readers will end up faced with a set of inevitable conclusions which help question, in a scholarly, well-supported basis, our currently held views of what modern history is. Blumi's book offers a persuasive case for the complete rejection of the trajectory of Europe – with the non-European world in hand – from heterogenic to hegemonic.

Foundations of Modernity's historical backdrop is the Ottoman Empire and its relationship with the western Balkans, the Persian Gulf and Yemen, over the course of the long nineteenth century (1789–1914). The approach is trans-national and cross-regional. The author also makes clear that an interdisciplinary approach, combining history, sociology, politics and the use of non-traditional analyses such as those by postmodernist thinkers, is helpful to give full texture to the topic and to the individual groups surveyed in the analysis.

While all world historians worth their salt know that trans-national, non-Euro-centric approaches are needed to understand the foundations of the modern world, the truth is that they often fail miserably to distinguish themselves from their own prejudices (used here not in a derogatory sense, but rather in an etymological one about 'pre-judging') as European or US historians (for they are, in vast majority, either from Europe or the US, or taught at institutions located in these geographical areas). Regardless of how excited readers may feel about reading a narrative of events that focuses on 'world' rather than on 'Europe', still the threads of empire, the relations between different nations, or states, is often seen through the distorted prism of European relations. In short, in most volumes that claim to be working on world history and paying attention to non-European, non-Western cultures, readers more often than not find themselves being told some narrative history of border of empire, of boundary of Europe, or of periphery of West.

Foundations of Modernity is in this sense truly an original book. It introduces a fresh analytical approach to the study of modern state power, and is deeply attuned to the social and cultural implications of the interaction between historical agents, the idea of nation, and their states, imperial or not, old empire or new empire, and so on. The social agents Blumi looks at are, also, refreshingly different. While some recent studies of empire and nationalism have looked at gender as a long-lost and much neglected category, one does wonder if gender in itself still proves enough. Blumi's book offers much more nuance, by looking at long-ignored agents like pirates, smugglers, refugees, voluntary emigrants, and the rural poor. Their relationship to their own identities as migrants, their understanding of nation, of nationalism, of the state, are all looked at with great care and abundance of detail, to provoke the reader to reconsider usual categorizations of social, political and cultural integration. Instead of offering a reductionist approach that seeks to make their experiences uniform and easily narrated, Blumi uses the likes of Foucault, Althusser and Cooper to emphasise the roughness of human experience and the fallacy of our currently held views about the birth of modernity, and of the modern world.

The book is divided into five chapters, with a solid and stimulating introduction and a rich conclusion, in addition to helpful maps and illustrations. The introduction sets the topic of narrating (and not narrating) the modern world from a European perspective, reconsidering the persuasiveness of the monolithic approach to the history of empire in light of a new gaze towards non-European, non-traditional geographies (Blumi is an expert on the western Balkans and on Yemen, so such a perspective comes to him not only from a wish to subvert traditional ways of thinking, but rather from his extensive scholarly research). The concept of 'periphery' versus mainstream is looked at carefully, asserting how this construct was part of a project that developed in the nineteenth century for a number of reasons and related to European states' development. Quite refreshingly, Blumi does not delve into explications about this European development, which very often tend to undermine all efforts to shift the narrative from European power to 'periphery', so the reader finishes Blumi's introduction with a renewed sense that the book is really about the non-European, non-mainstream world. This is in part what Blumi called 'undermining the very structure of power which sits atop the trope of Modernity today by simply not acknowledging it historically' (p. 9). In doing so, Blumi's pragmatic approach truly enables the reader to rethink the history of modernity.

Chapter 1 considers the local scramble for ascendancy by the Ottoman Empire, ending with its fall from a position of domination in geopolitical terms. Blumi starts by outlining the Ottoman Empire's traditional narrative, which has come to constitute a case in point for those arguing for a particular path to modernity by a modern empire, one which the Ottoman Empire failed to reconcile with its own developments. More interested in experiences of empires than in the structured narrative of their trajectory, Blumi looks at the historical complexity of the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire in the long nineteenth century, separating the narrative of the Great Men in Power from the history of other groups of agents. Many of the historical developments which traditionally fit into a grand-narrative of European power are depicted here as contingencies, thus eschewing the Euro-centric determinism of many approaches to the sidelines.

Chapter 2 looks at difference, taking further the now well-trodden notion of ethnic diversity as particularly relevant for the study of modernity, to incorporate other considerations about notoriously under-studied groups. Mobility and migration are contrasted to power and financial capital to show how our longstanding views about how history occurs – often depriving groups from any sort of agency whatsoever – need to be reconsidered. The chapter dwells on maps as instruments of power narratives, at the same time showing the paradoxical idea that maps are themselves authoritative, they dictate actions, they are not themselves passive tools, which offers an interesting analogy to the argument Blumi makes about people. The chapter ends considering the impact of the struggle for territory and the limits of power, allowing for the emergence of local power on the borders of 'empire'.

Chapter 3 picks up on the human element of this reconsidered narrative, looking at human movement in the Ottoman Empire and its surrounding geographical areas over a period of 150 years. By looking at the tensions emerging from these migrations (voluntary or not), Blumi reinforces the notion of 'multiple modernities' in a context where winners and losers, mainstream and peripheral were harder to identify – and their contribution much trickier to quantify – than our commonly held views would suggest. Chapter 4 continues this problematisation by disaggregating the diaspora experience, firstly by dismissing the notion of exiles' consciousness as somehow uniform and shaped by the same ideas and notions, and then by looking at migrants' varying sets of interests and considering how they came to form something cohesive together.

The last chapter follows the idea of historical process as a derivative of European Enlightenment thought, looking at the structures of the Ottoman periphery and the social, economic and political developments in the area, which, Blumi argues, were anything but a natural part of a transition to Modernity. The fact that the experiences of empire were incongruent in the Ottoman Empire and western Balkans, Red Sea and Persian Gulf areas (supported by the evidence Blumi presented) shows how the birth of 'Modernity' was not part of an Euro-centric process, or in fact of a process of any kind. Rather, it was the result of chaotic human agency which our Western or Westernised need for linear progressions has conceptually fashioned into a trajectory with beginning and end.

Blumi's book is not easy to understand. In fact, oftentimes readers will be well justified to put it away because the author raises so many questions that one cannot quite cope with the evidence used in 'proving' assertions. But this reviewer believes that Blumi was not in fact endeavouring to create a new narrative or a new version of the history of modernity. Rather, the whole point was to question the possibility of narrative in light of the chaotic, centrifugal forces at play, from individual experiences and voices that are unique and not possible made unison, to state narratives which seek to submerge identities into a mainstream storyline. In this sense, Blumi's book is an extremely welcome addition to reading lists on empire, states and nations, and on historical approaches to modernity, even as the interpretation forces us to continue seeking answers to questions which defy most forms of cohesive responses.

Isabel DiVanna

University of Cambridge, UK

Email: id239@cam.ac.uk

© 2013 Isabel DiVanna

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2013.812848>