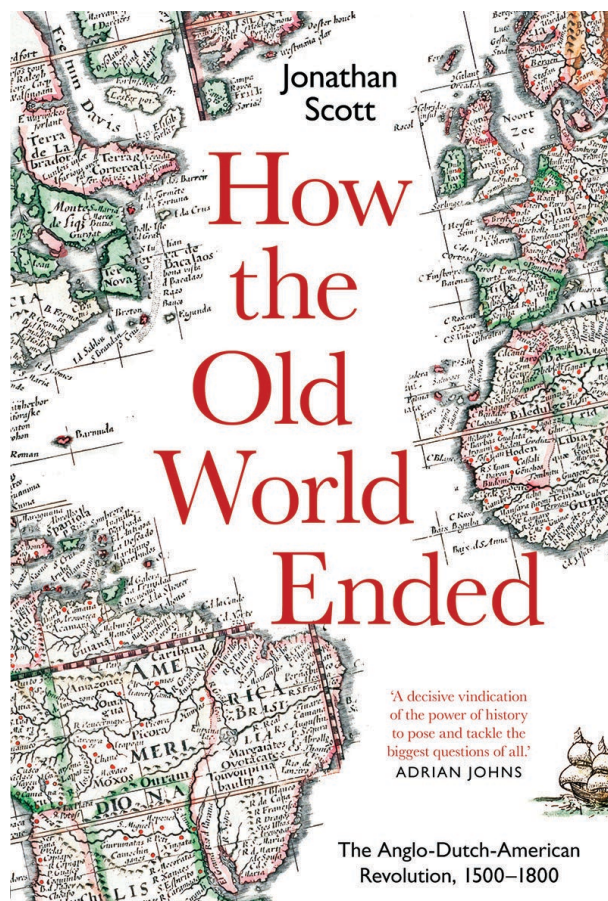


Review
Jonathan Scott:
***How the old world ended: The Anglo-Dutch-American
revolution, 1500-1800***

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. 392 p.
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Reviewed by Kurt Hübner



What can be more exciting in times of hegemonic struggles between China and the U.S. than reading an ultimate analysis of the spectacular rise of British hegemony in the era of Dutch dominance? Jonathan Scott's *How the old world ended* promises to deliver what is needed to get some orientation. History, as the text on the book sleeve reminds us, has the power to pose and tackle the question of today by inspecting the past. His answers to the puzzle, though, are only partially helpful to understand the current conundrum. One could say that this is no surprise as history does not repeat itself, and developments of today are fundamentally different from the ones of the past. Scott avoids running into this problem as his book comes forward with several hypotheses that, aggregated, come close to a (universal) model that consequently provides insights to current processes in the global political economy. The subtitle of the book positions the "end of the old world" in the period 1500 to 1800, thus stressing the long period where something ends and something new starts. This idea is not new as authors like Wallerstein and Braudel earlier made the point that changes are time-consuming, not least as the resilience of "the old" hinders and blocks the emergence of "the new." What is different in Scott's analysis is his idea that

England's republican revolution of 1649-53 [was] [...] a – perhaps the – turning point in modern world history. It was a spectacular attempt to change not only the English government but social and moral life in the direction pioneered by the Dutch Revolt and republic from the late sixteenth century. It enacted a revolution in the military-fiscal and especially naval resources of the state to confront and overcome Dutch competition. One result was the Plantation and Navigation system that nationalized and weaponized the Anglo-American economic relationship. It was only within the context of this navally protected trading monopoly that more than a century later the Industrial Revolution could be triggered by the alchemical power of American shopping. (2)

Unlike many world-system scholars or models of hegemonies, Scott makes clear that the key independent variable is political.

The United Provinces of the Netherlands are sometimes labelled as the first hegemon of the modern world-system, and Scott makes the point that the rise of England was only possible due to the model character of the United Provinces that was so carefully copied and adjusted by the English. Command of the waters was an essential element of Dutch hegemony by ways of engineering feats like canals, and also by building a formidable fleet for its far-reaching commercial enterprises: "Guided, and goaded, by Dutch example, the English republic ruthlessly modernized the state's political economy and transformed its military-fiscal power. In the process, it created a maritime culture of imperial and

global reach” (289). This insight very much follows the work put forward by scholars like Wallerstein and Taylor. What Scott adds to those analyses is the work of a historian using a wide variety of contemporary sources to illustrate the argument that British merchants quickly were installing a deep and wide commercial network which was supported by the common language as well as a shared cultural and legal system in its new markets. Scott’s underlying main idea is that Britain’s interaction with the United Provinces of the Netherlands and with its colonies in North America was the critical ingredient for the event that eventually changed the world: the Industrial Revolution. Rather than focusing his analysis on this argument, though, he dedicates quite some pages on the Republican Revolution of 1649-53, which he characterizes as the turning point of making the modern world.

Given the weight of the triangle relations of England, the United Provinces and North America, the book disappoints when it comes to the empirical support of the main hypotheses. One would have expected a discussion of the work of cliometric historians on trade structures and trade dynamics of the triangle that suggests that trade effects were not as substantial for the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, compared to productivity advances in the agricultural sector. The real disappointment of the book is the discussion of the financial underpinning of Dutch and British hegemony. Giovanni Arrighi convincingly showed in the case of the United Provinces that superior banking techniques at the Amsterdam Bourse and financial hubs of Amsterdam helped to make the Dutch merchant class into leaders of the growth model. It was the advanced financial infrastructure that allocated idle capital to all kinds of commercial activities, not least supporting cross-border trade ventures. The same can be said for England, where financial institutions early on engaged in the triangle relations and played an influential role in state formation. Scott only casually mentions this critical ingredient of Dutch and English hegemony. He hints, for example, at the jump of joint-stock companies from 15 in 1689 to 150 in 1695, but he does not actually provide an economics-driven explanation for this explosion. Nor does he, at any point, discuss the role of the banking sector – think about the relevance of Amsterdam’s exchange bank – or the function of the Guilder and Pound for international transactions.

I am not convinced that Scott’s analysis of the ending of the old world provides us with essential clues to interpret and understand the current hegemonic struggle. Rather than pretending that his study can shed light on the global current, Scott closes his book with an eye on Brexit. He rightly points to the argument which he stressed quite a few times in his book: it was the intensity, complexity, and quality of England’s relationship with its neighbours rather than distinction or even isolation that made it strong and dominant. Brexit is exactly

the opposite. In this respect, Scott's book makes a substantial contribution as he can convincingly show that what is needed is an open-minded as well as an outward-looking political-economic class for it to succeed in a global economy. And yet, much of his arguments are of a qualitative rather than of a quantitative nature, leaving it thus up to the reader to accept or reject them.

About the reviewer

Kurt Hübner is professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver (British Columbia, Canada) where he holds the Jean Monnet Chair for European Integration and Global Political Economy and is interim director at the Institute for European Studies. He received his Ph.D. in economics and political science from the Free University Berlin (Germany) in 1988. His expertise is in the field of European integration in the context of the global political economy. His focus is on the Euro, specifically the role of the Euro in global currency relations as well as the economic mode of governance. A further area of his expertise is the relationship between international competitiveness, innovation, and climate policies. Over the last couple of years, his work has focused also on trade policy issues, notably on the agreement between Canada and the European Union. He was a visiting research professor at University of Birmingham, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, National University in Singapore, Science Po in Grenoble, LUISS University in Rome, The Institute for Advanced Studies at Waseda University in Tokyo, and Ben-Gurion University in Israel, where he is also an associate professor. Among the books he authored and edited is *National pathways to low carbon emission economies: Innovation policies for decarbonizing and unlocking* (Routledge, 2018).