

How the Indians Conquered the West

American History Turned Upside-Down

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The challenge of going beyond the national narrative has occupied historians for decades. When applied to North America, it has turned our understanding of historical events such as the “Conquest of the West” upside down. Through an examination of the history of the Comanches, a Finnish historian is pushing this reversal of perspectives as far as it can go, in order to highlight the power that was in the hands of the indigenous people when they came face-to-face with the Europeans.

Reviewed: Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008, 500 p.

Initially published by Yale University Press in 2008, Pekka Hämäläinen’s book has arrived in France heavy with the garlands of no less than eleven prestigious prizes. Even in the United States, where such rewards are often essential to ensure the visibility of an academic text, this number is enough to make a few people jealous. And it must be said that Hämäläinen, a history lecturer at the University of California in Santa Barbara and then in Oxford, and who was educated in the Universities of Helsinki and Nebraska, is not an unattractive candidate for such juries: his English is impeccable, and he has written a work that fits in well with current standards in the historical collections of American university presses, which are keen to expand their audience beyond the academic world by tackling themes that resonate with contemporary issues. In fact, far from restricting itself to revising the history of one tribe, his *Comanche Empire* puts forward a magisterial rewriting of a whole swathe of American history, ignoring current national borders at a time of mass migrations when these borders are more than ever a burning issue. This is particularly the case in the American South-West. Strongly influenced by his research into the borderlands that particularly defined this region and are now very much in academic fashion¹, he makes full use of them, by spectacularly pushing through to their logical conclusion their ambitions for renewal. Using some solid arguments, but also some more questionable ones, he reveals the political, economic and cultural hold of an Indian people over a huge territory located between the Rocky Mountains, the Platte River and the Rio Grande – a hold that has been more or less overlooked by historians. In this zone of influence referred to by the Spaniards as the *Comanchería*, the European imperial powers either disappeared or were forced, right

¹ See his article co-written with Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands”, *The Journal of American History*, September 2011, p. 338-361.

through to the middle of the 19th century, to submit to rules imposed by a powerful indigenous confederation dominated by the people who were for many years referred to as the Lords of the Plains: the Comanches.

Hämäläinen's approach can be classified as a type of revisionism. He has inherited this position and this project from a previous generation of American historians who specialise in the relationships between indigenous people and settlers – their leader, Richard White, has signed the French preface to the book². The “new Indian” but also environmental history written by these reformists had, from the 1980s, set itself the aim of giving back to the Indians the place that they deserved within an American academic landscape in which only anthropologists and military historians seemed to take any interest in them. Their approach was motivated by their interest in the Indian activism of the 1960s and 70s, but also by their taking into account problems as diverse and complex as the rationality of the players involved, interracial and intercultural contacts, the theory of dependence, or the environmental impact of the changes that came in the wake of the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas. These authors took up again, with the intention of wringing its neck, the old theme of the Frontier which had enabled the glory of Frederick Jackson Turner, a central figure of the American historical school at the turn of the twentieth century, whose ideas dominated the history of the American West until the 1960s. The history of North America before the Independence of the United States, in particular, was turned upside down. Before the New Indian Historians, the slogan of Manifest Destiny often led historians to think of European expansion on the continent as being inevitable, thus reducing the Indians to the role of the heroic, cruel and tragic victims of an inevitable fate³. On the contrary, New Indian Historians said, the Native peoples were formidable adversaries, capable of adapting to the changes to their environment with surprising speed, and even in turn to influence the settlers. In fact, Europe had changed the order of things in North America more through the diseases it imported than through its weapons or commerce, and that, all in all, up until the end of the 18th century, the competition between European empires had left room for genuine native powers. Richard White, in *The Middle Ground*⁴, a book that was as celebrated in its day as Hämäläinen's is now, thus showed the huge importance of the Iroquois confederation, which was able to balance English and French pressure to dominate the North-East of today's United States and the South-East of what became Canada. Hämäläinen has undertaken to emulate these illustrious predecessors, while attempting to move away from some of their faults. His book highlights the achievements of the movement and tries, sometimes clumsily, to go beyond some of its most famous claims.

A Choice of Society

Above all, Hämäläinen takes from the New Indian Historians their methodological and thematic eclecticism, using the resources of ethnohistory and of environmental history, their awareness of scales, as well as of power relations and cultural cross-fertilisation; with all of this in mind, he rereads a considerable mass of French, English and Spanish archives and primary sources. His most visible innovation is the periodisation that he chooses to work with. While the American War of Independence or, at best, the Anglo-American War of 1812, are still most often used as the cut-off date that signals the end of the historical influence of the

² See, on a different note, the review of his book on the railways in *Books and Ideas*, <http://www.booksandideas.net/Disorder-and-the-Contingent-Paths.html>

³ See in particular Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890–1990*, Berkeley, Calif., 1997.

⁴ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, New York, 1991.

Native Peoples, Hämäläinen ignores this rupture and shows how inane it is in the space that he is interested in: the current Americano-Mexican “South-West”. This approach encourages him to read European sources in order to look for the traces of a different history to the one that they wish to write, which is dominated solely by the actions of the colonising powers. In his book, the story of the Comanches covers a very unusual historical arc, since they burst onto the historical scene at the time when the Eastern tribes were withdrawing from it, towards the middle of the 18th century, well before other just as formidable people, like the Cheyennes or the Lakotas (also known as the Sioux) became known⁵. The itinerary that was retraced in this way is more than the story of a rise and fall, even if this trope is never far away in Hämäläinen’s narrative (p. 360). Mindful of historical contingency, of the vagaries that affected the Comanches as they do any people, Hämäläinen above all attempts to show that this population was a genuine power for over a century, that it was on a level playing field with the European empires, and that it got the upper hand over them on more than one occasion. This native empire was thus not an indirect product of the arrival of the Europeans, or a product of their weakness, but an autonomous construction in its own right.

The American historians that preceded Hämäläinen, by carrying out a partial reading of the sources produced by European, and in particular Spanish, administrators and travellers, often had a tendency to only take into account the military impact of the Comanches, which was reduced to raids that were viewed as the expression of an innate savagery, or, at best, of a “warrior cult” (p. 268). What the author shows, in contrast, is that the indisputable military power of the Comanches was in fact nothing more than the symptom of a “system” (p. 361 ff.) which he pieces together as follows: the Comanches, who are related to the Shoshones, were born at the moment when they adopted the horse and allied with the Utes, the dominant people in the Southern Plains at the beginning of the 18th century⁶. This choice of society and this alliance guaranteed Comanche domination. Riding horses to hunt bison and conduct warfare, and making optimal use of these animals in the favourable environmental context of the high valley of Arkansas soon allowed the Comanches to stand out among the indigenous nations. From the 1720s, they plundered the territories of the North of New Spain (which would eventually become Mexico), and specialised in stealing horses and kidnapping Indians as well as Spanish settlers, whom they would enslave or hold ransom (*rescate*). This predatory activity went hand-in-hand with a commercial activity that was as necessary as it was profitable. Taken away from Texas, stolen goods were resold to New Mexico, and vice-versa. More importantly still, the Comanches would exchange them with the Indian people that were in contact with French establishments in the Lower Mississippi Valley: horses, mules and hides were used to buy Indian agricultural products and European manufactured products, in particular rifles. As a result of all this, the Comanche enjoyed genuine prosperity.

Even better, located as they were at the centre of a commercial network that ran for several thousand kilometres, the Comanches were able to impose their power on other Indian peoples, the Wichita confederation, the Osages, or the Apaches, through either diplomacy or war. As for European peoples, relegated to the periphery of the story, they only achieved a degree of success when they were able to play the game that was imposed by the Comanches. Any peace was subject to the Comanches’ good will, and paid for with costly gifts. New

⁵ White himself devoted an important article to the Lakota (Sioux) hegemony in the Northern Plains as early as 1978 (“The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Sept., 1978), p. 319-343).

⁶ On the subject of the horse as a radical factor for change in the societies of the Plains, see his article “The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (Dec., 2003), p. 833-862.

Spain, which was cruelly short of money, was not able to cope with these repeated demands and had to agree to see its Northern territories be periodically devastated and reduced to the status of colonial annexes (p. 219) of the *Comanchería*. It would take until 1785-1786 and the reforms of the Bourbons for the Spaniards to be able to appear for a moment to regain control of the situation. At this point, they signed two peace treaties with the Western and Eastern Comanches, granting them commercial concessions and gifts in exchange for a fragile end to hostilities. The idea was the same as the one that had long ensured the success of the French in the *pays d'en haut* described by Richard White: to establish a common ground with some chiefs, make them dependent on European goods, and bring them under the Spanish sphere of influence. But the Comanches did not play along with this game for long. The peace was broken as early as 1790.

Spontaneous Imperialism?

The Comanche system appears to have been naturally expansionist. Thus, neither the American and Mexican independences, nor the handover of Louisiana by France, constituted crucial ruptures in this age-old process of expansion: using eloquent maps, the author shows the progressive expansion of Comanche territory, and the increasing reach of raids which, in the 1840s, stopped just over 200 kilometres away from Mexico (p. 221). The weakness of the European establishment in this region is not the only, negative, cause of this expansion. Internal factors are far more important: these include strong demographics, supported by polygyny and the assimilation of captives into the Comanche population, the intensive use of natural resources (water, grass, bison, horse) and the quest for prestige (p. 352).

This exploitation of an ecosystem led to the exploitation of surrounding populations. The Comanches were in constant need of more horses and captives, and of more raiding expeditions (p. 247 and 269), in order to satisfy their needs and externalise the tensions generated by their adoption of an “embryonic” capitalism (p. 290). Hämäläinen rejects a culturalist approach that would view these solely as the product of a “warrior cult” or of dynamics of revenge, and instead insists on their profound economic rationality. Nor does he fail to mention the long-term destructive effects of this environmental and military headlong rush: the overexploitation of natural resources, in the form of over-grazed plains or over-hunted bison herds (in particular in the light of the numbers hunted by other peoples, be they Indian or European), ultimately put the whole system at risk. But the author nevertheless shows the Comanches’ remarkable ability to adapt to these limitations, which led them to sell bison hides to Americans and then, in the 1850s, to adopt the cattle in order to farm it... or to steal it from the numerous Anglo-American settlers in Texas (which became independent from Mexico in 1836). The Comanche system turned out to be more than capable of surviving these major crises, whether they were caused by the smallpox epidemics brought over by the Europeans or by the arrival of Indian peoples that were pushed back from the West to the Mississippi by Anglo-American settlers.

It took until 1846-8 and the American victory over Mexico for the situation to really change in the region: the influx of American and European settlers, and the expeditions of the Texas Rangers, led to the first retreat of the *Comanchería* (p. 310). But the Civil War soon provided a twenty-year respite. The reservations into which some of the Comanches agreed to go were integrated into the Comanche economic system, despite having been designed by the American state as centres for assimilation. A new cycle of prosperity based on the old recipes of raiding took advantage of the Confederation’s war, and then of its defeat, which left abandoned millions of heads of cattle. It was thus only under huge pressure, both

environmental and military, followed by a real demographic collapse in the last third of the 19th century, that the Comanches ended up yielding.

Agency and the Native Empire

The first thing that we can draw from this picture is the Comanches' capacity for autonomous action, the agency which American historians and sociologists have taken pains, since the 1980s, to recognise in historical subjects that are too often treated as helpless characters in a story that is already foretold. The author locates this capacity at the crossroads of an ability to take into account environmental constraints, and of a tactical, if not strategic intelligence, which explains both the breadth of Comanche successes, their ability to bounce back, and the slowness of their collapse. Whatever he says about it, this does not fundamentally call into question the periodisation of the regional history, which he finds himself obliged to rely on. The major turning point is indeed constituted by the arrival of the Americans, however long it may have taken for their power to manifest itself. However, we will no longer be able, following his book, to believe that the Comanches were content with setting themselves up in a niche that was created by the confrontation between Empires, an intermediate space that might be termed to be "waiting" for the Nation-States. The Comanches were navigating a competitive space within which, it is true, there were not a great number of Europeans – but the Comanches themselves were responsible for this state of affairs, which made no small contribution to the ease with which the Americans were able to defeat the Mexicans in the region. Should, however, the responsibility for this situation be ascribed to them alone, or to the totality of indigenous nations, whose role it feels as though Hämäläinen, carried away by his subject, has a bit too much of a tendency to minimise⁷?

Violence, another theme that is re-examined by the New Indian Historians, is also highlighted by the author (p. 253-5), who refuses to place too much stress on the phenomena of encounters and cross-fertilisation that are abundantly described in some of the most memorable texts in the historiography of the borderlands⁸. There is little or no middle ground for compromise between Indians and non-Indians in his book (p. 130): the Comanches are too powerful for this. Here too, this premise leads to some excesses, since it has the effect of marginalising, to the benefit of the Comanches, certain historical players with less clear identities than those of the Indian peoples, such as the mixed-race *Comancheros*, who developed a culture and society that borrowed both from the Indian and the European spheres in the territories of New Spain (p. 12 et 20-9). The criticism of the concept of the middle ground, although it is justified and had already been well-developed before the publication of *The Comanche Empire*⁹, seems here to have been pushed too far, conveying a universe in which the Comanches, Spanish and other ethnonyms appear as open but fundamentally very

⁷ The difference between his approach of this issue in his 2003 article and in the book is quite illuminating: whereas the former shows a world in which the Southern plains allow for the (difficult) coexistence of several Indian powers, in the book the Comanches appear to have indentured just about any of them that matter.

⁸ For example *The Middle Ground*; James Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*, Chapel Hill, 2002; Gary Nash, *Red, White, and Black. Source*; Daniel H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783*, Chapel Hill, 1992. The theme of the borderlands itself has been brilliantly outlined in an article that is already quite old: Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review*, 104 (June 1999), p. 814–15.

⁹ See in particular the special report devoted to the middle ground in 2006 by *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jan., 2006).

stable entities, whereas in reality numerous mixed-race populations appear to have navigated between the two, sometimes quite successfully¹⁰.

More generally, *The Comanche Empire* seems constrained in its argument by the breadth of work accomplished by its predecessors, which explains certain difficulties it has with positioning itself: the Comanches at times appear as being independent, and at times as being connected to transatlantic trade networks, occupying a trading niche (p. 97) in an economic system that is beyond them. The theme of the increasing dependence of the Indians on European productions, which is in particular referred to by White in *Roots of Dependency* with regard to the Choctaws, Pawnees and Navajos, is therefore clumsily shrugged off by Hämäläinen, even though he clearly shows that reducing the economic position of the Comanches to this one single position is nonsensical¹¹.

It is the very term of empire, and its inevitable association with the idea of the fall (one is often reminded of Gibbon's take on the Roman Empire), that poses a problem here. Taken as a metaphor for power, it seems perfectly appropriate for the kind of domination exercised by the Comanches over the Southern Plains: their military power, which was acknowledged and respected by European observers, was undeniable, as was their diplomatic and commercial efficiency. But as soon as we want to move from the metaphor to a more positive definition, this demonstration runs into trouble. The Comanches are at times referred to as a coalition (p. 27), a nation (p. 437); an exceptional empire (p. 3-4), or an indigenous empire like any other (p. 8); their "imperial" policy appears both as "planned, synchronised and domineering" (p. 12) and as unconscious (p. 352); as implemented by "a structured and centralised polity" (p. 104) or on the contrary thanks to "a collective and diffuse leadership" (p. 135). These various descriptions can be explained by the development of the Comanches themselves, but the author does not offer us a synthetic overview of these stages. Even more bothersome is the fact that, so caught up is he in demonstrating that the Comanche Empire does not in any way yield to the European empires, Hämäläinen forgets to tell us how the Comanches themselves view this process, preferring to accumulate statistically-backed demonstrations of this power that at times appear hazardous. By refusing to engage with these questions, and by selecting as his narrative thread a concept that is prestigious but may be ill-suited to the task at hand, the author probably does not quite achieve the tableau of the borderlands of the Southern Plains which he recently wished for¹².

He thus implicitly underlines one of the major problems with American-style revisionism: the difficulty it has with freeing itself from a logic of reversal, of saying the opposite to old national narratives, in order to offer in their stead interpretative systems that articulate several different spaces¹³. Hämäläinen's remarkably comprehensive work may not be the general overview that we are all waiting for in this field. Nevertheless, it brilliantly gives back their place to the native people of the continent, without omitting to mention the role played by historical contingency both in their successes and in their failures.

¹⁰ See Brooks 2002; and Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, p. 164, in which the author goes to the length of referring to a reversal of commercial flows, going from East-West to North-South, thus placing the Comanches at the centre of exchanges in the Great Plains.

¹¹ Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

¹² See "On Borderlands", art. cit.

¹³ For recent examples that successfully articulate borders, immigration and national identity, see in particular Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Princeton, 2004; and Eric V. Meeks, *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona*, Austin, 2007.

Going Further

Since the Comanches have survived their empire, it is instructive to take a look at the [website of the Comanche Nation in Oklahoma](#), in particular its section devoted to the legacy of the warriors of the 18th and 19th centuries.

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