

# Book Review: The Eagle and the Dragon by Serge Gruzinski

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11/03/2015

This book addresses two episodes from the sixteenth century which shaped the relationship between Europe and the civilisations of China and Mexico. [James B. Cuffe](#) writes that while the text is at times a little difficult to read, the book nevertheless offers a highly rewarding account of both European colonialism, and the histories of Central America and China.

Today's intense levels of culture contact and intermeshing spurred by globalisation warrant an interest into its development. In our times there can be a sense that it was all too inevitable that the world should be the way it is yet there is an era when the world became this particular world and it is important to realise that the events of those times were anything but inevitable.

*[Globalisation is] in no way an inexorable and irreversible process, mechanically accomplishing a preconceived plan leading to the standardisation of the world. – P3*

The contact between the 'old world' and 'new world' brought to an end one of the most spectacular developments in human world history, that of a civilisation independent of and isolated from all other civilisations. A fascinating moment in the human story and one that Serge Gruzinski shares with us instilled with his own passion for the subject. Gruzinski is the Director of Studies at *Ecole des hautes etudes en sciences sociales*, and a distinguished historian. This title, first published in French as *L'Aigle et le Dragon* in 2012, introduces us to the intimate details of the lives and times of some of Europe's most important adventurers – well known in the name of Hernán Cortés and perhaps lesser known in Tomé Pires.



Aztec temple, Credit: [Gary Stimson](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

This revealing of world powers in the sixteenth century is laid out in what the French refer to as *histoire croisée* or *entangled histories* that attempts in its methodology to move beyond national or teleological frames. In this mode Gruzinski foregrounds the contingency of actions and the role of chance, luck and misfortune. The brilliance of the book lies in the engaging voice with which the history is told.

*to compare the Mexican coast and the China Sea is also to mitigate our ineradicable Eurocentrism and make new questions emerge. It is to reconnect the links which national historiographies have broken and to subject the newly reconnected elements to a global reading in which they interact with each other and no longer only with Europe. It is by shifting the focus and no longer only by inverting the points of view, as in the already distant age of the 'vision of the vanquished', that we can hope to achieve a history that makes sense in our own age. P59*

The author is clearly endowed with an in-depth knowledge – not only of a swath of 16<sup>th</sup> historical themes and process – but also with the minutiae of life to intriguing and sometimes humorous effect. It can at times be hard to distinguish between where Gruzinski reveals details he has gleaned from diaries or travelogues and where he might embellish to flesh out our understanding. For example:

*Santaella addressed himself to the count of Cifuentes, to whom he dedicated his translation, and to the nobility, that is to the Court, but also to the large number of clergy and merchants who live in the great Andalusian city. He knew how to please the sort of people who were always on the lookout for new things, never before seen or described, avid to discovery 'the grandeurs of the lordships, the provinces, the towns, the riches and the diversity of the nation and of the people with their laws, their sects and their customs'. P44*

References for the quotes are omitted and it is unclear whether the personality of Santaella is accessible from the sources or whether it is the author's interpretation due to his knowledge of the context for these times and places.

Occasionally a lack of cohesiveness can at times make for slow reading. For example a paragraph running from pages 7 to 8 mentions some similarities between Zhengde and Moctezuma, while then in the very next paragraph it is stated that "these two emperors had nothing in common..." Rather than being a mistake or apparent contradiction it seems that such turns of phrase appear due to an effort to create an atmosphere for the reader, to draw them into an adventure story.

The author's efforts are of course to convey the sense of voyage and adventure, a sense of the leap into the unknown for the Europeans of that time. However the recurrent double-takes from such phrasing causes frustration at the many leading and rhetorical questions designed to pique the reader's interest, particularly when (no doubt) the reader is already interested and no such prodding is required. This is only a subjective opinion but in my reading there were too many unnecessary flourishes that distracted from a story that needed no dressing. The magnitude of these events are as they are:

*They had done much more than discover new lands, they had come face to face with another humanity which had appeared from nowhere. P90*

Further, the effect of writing in quick succession – the trials of the Portuguese and then the Spanish – artificially reinforces a correspondence in their movements and experiences even when the author states the differences.

This book is not for the expert familiar with the theme, but it is an enjoyable introduction to an era with intriguing accounts of events and characters. If one can make allowance for the occasional awkwardness in sentence structure and running of many facts in dense prose the book is very rewarding and I do recommend it. I would push for those who can, to read the original French version, but failing this one will certainly need an interest in the topic to start with. This is not a text book nor an introductory book for a complete novice but it is a story of intrigue for the

discerning reader.

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**Dr James B. Cuffe** is General Editor for the *Irish Journal of Anthropology* and Lecturer with the School of Sociology and Philosophy at [University College Cork](#). His interests span Anthropology and Philosophy especially with regard to Technology, Social Theory and Chinese culture and society. His publications include a number of chapters in Chinese and English on Sino-Irish economic and cultural relations, and, anthropological theory and review articles within the aforementioned disciplines. He maintains a profile page at [www.cuffe.eu](http://www.cuffe.eu). [Read more reviews by James.](#)

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