

Book Reviews

Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need To Know About Global Politics*, Elliott & Thompson, London, 2015; *The Power of Geography: Ten Maps that Reveal the Future of Our World*, Elliott & Thompson, London, 2021.

The war in Ukraine and the rise of China's influence are reshaping geopolitics. Our world is changing and we are trying to understand these phenomena with the aid of a variety of lenses. One approach puts an emphasis on the role of geography and its influence on policy and decision-making. Tim Marshall attempted to explain and teach about our world through his two well-known books: *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need To Know About Global Politics* and *The Power of Geography: Ten Maps that Reveal the Future of Our World*. It is also an exercise in trying to remind readers some of the basics, namely, understanding history and international relations by looking at maps.

Tim Marshall is a British journalist focusing on issues of foreign affairs, international diplomacy, and geopolitics. His career spreads over many years, which he spent working for the BBC and more recently as the Foreign Affairs Editor and Diplomacy Editor of Sky News. His activity includes reporting on events in war-torn countries such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Apart from the two books on review here, he also wrote: *Worth Dying For: The Power & Politics Of Flags* (2016) and *Divided: Why We're Living in an Age of Walls* (2018)¹.

The past decade saw the publication of several popular books which aimed to explain current affairs through history. *Prisoners of Geography* and *The Power of Geography* are part of this trend from which they borrow, at least partially. One notable example is Niall Ferguson's *Civilization* (2011)², which proposes the idea of 'five killer apps' which contributed to the rise of the West. In the same period, Ian Morris contributed with his *Why the West Rules – For Now* (2010)³, which sought to answer very much the same questions. More recently, we have *Rivers of Power* (2020)⁴ by Laurence C. Smith which illustrates the impact of nature

¹ <https://www.simonandschuster.com/authors/Tim-Marshall/523742523>, accessed on June 30, 2022; <https://www.waterstones.com/author/tim-marshall/92481>, accessed on June 30, 2022.

² Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin), 2011.

³ Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History and what they reveal about the Future* (London: Profile Books), 2010.

⁴ Laurence C. Smith, *Rivers of Power: How a Natural Force Raised Kingdoms, Destroyed Civilizations, and Shapes Our World* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown Spark), 2020.

on patterns of human civilization. They represent an attempt at explaining present-day geopolitics with help from historical interpretation.

Prisoners of Geography was an obvious success with the readers. This was mostly due to its accessible format and easy-to-follow argumentation. The book did not aim to up-end or revolutionize global studies. It mostly follows important countries which would be of obvious interest to the reader: Russia, China, USA, Western Europe, or the Middle East. In the follow-up, *The Power of Geography*, the focus shifts on smaller case studies: Iran, Australia, Saudi Arabia, the Sahel, or Ethiopia. In a sense, this choice broadens the scope proposed by the first book. As a consequence, it is also more thought provoking as fewer readers might think of issues such as water wars in Africa. The sequel definitely has a bleaker undertone running through it.

Both books follow a simple structure of ten chapters, each focusing on a country or part of the world. Marshall begins by describing the geography of the area. This lays the ground for his arguments of how this influenced its historical evolution. He does this very well in several examples. Marshall illustrates Russia's need for expansion in order to secure its center in the Moscow region. The description of Iran is also very well done, as he explains why its civilization survived for so long. This also underlines its specificities and its current geopolitical situation. Another well written chapter is that on China. Here he mostly manages to highlight Beijing's current ambitions and strategies of projecting power.

Marshall clearly focuses on the current situation as a result of geographical conditions. Countries have evolved under these pressures which influence their political and strategic thinking. In a certain sense we could argue that he is influenced by realism. His depiction of the world does show countries more as individual actors striving for power in order to ensure security. This is also where most criticism stems from. He does not necessarily ignore other factors such as sociological or economic ones, but they end-up playing a secondary role. However, we should keep in mind two aspects.

Firstly, at least in Russia's case, the invasion of 2022 proves there is truth to spatial determinism in some cases. Secondly, for Marshall geography is not only a major theme, but it is also a narrative device. It allows for an easy introduction and facilitates jumping from case to case in books which are mostly meant as educational instruments. In this regard, we can find similarities of style of two of Norman Davies' books, *Vanished Kingdoms*⁵ and his most recent *Beneath Another Sky*⁶. He uses similar writing

⁵ Norman Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The Rise and Fall of States and Nations* (London: Penguin), 2012.

devices which allow him to travel around the world while telling individual stories of places within a broader narrative. Although, stylistically, there is a broad gap between the two authors, Marshall's being more simplistic given that he targets a less specialized audience.

With *Prisoners of Geography* and *The Power of Geography* Tim Marshall proposes that we once again look at the role of geography in geopolitics. While, indeed it is not the sole influencing factor for decision makers and historical phenomena, it will always play a certain role. Used as a narrative device, this approach can help create a useful introduction for a less specialized audience. However, it does show its limitations if the reader is more familiar with international affairs and history. They are part of a decade-old wave of writers trying to explain why the world looks as it does and should be seen as such.

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⁶ Norman Davies, *Beneath Another Sky: A Global Journey into History* (London: Penguin), 2017.