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To Understand the World, Follow the Water

Terje Tvedt’s world history is a gem for those looking to explore the longest throughlines.

BOOK REVIEW

Terje Tvedt



### World History: The Past as a Mirror

Nonfiction, 428 pages

J. M. Stenersens Forlag

“**HE WHO CANNOT** draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth,” said the German writer Goethe. Terje Tvedt doubles that.

In his new book, the well-known and controversial historian covers more than 5,000 years of world history, from the first known civilizations in what is now Iraq to the American empire.

**AN IMPORTANT ISSUE** for him is to free history from the “tyranny of the present.” That is to say that history is only judged against modern standards, and becomes “a continuation of politics by other means.” Identity-politics fanatics who want to tear down statues and remove benches cannot count on Terje Tvedt for support.

At the same time, he asserts that history never ends, and that the past must always be re-examined and reinterpreted in the light of new problems and political struggles.

**THREE KEY IDEAS** for Tvedt are the challenge from China, the debate over European colonialism, and the global climate crisis. These ideas also guide the selections he has made from among the dizzying amounts of material.

Tvedt concentrates on five themes:

* The first civilizations in the Middle East and India.
* “The Asian Era,” at its height around 1500, with emphasis on China and the Ottoman Empire.
* Western domination in the 1800s with the Industrial Revolution and imperialism.
* The fight between the US and China for global dominance in the present day.
* Climate change as part of a larger story about humanity’s relationship to nature and natural disasters in particular.

**TVEDT IS SKEPTICAL** of cultural explanations. His perspective on history is materialistic, or, more precisely, “hydraulic.”

The relationship between water and political and economic development has run like an artery through his entire career as a historian.

In the book, rivers, lakes, and canals continuously show up as driving forces of history, as dense as rain showers on an October day.

**THIS CAN SEEM** monomaniacal. And critics can certainly find examples of Tvedt trying to squeeze too much moisture out of the same sponge.

When he argues that the Industrial Revolution happened in England, and not in China or India, he emphasizes that the English rivers were large and stable enough to be able to build power plants for factories along them.

In addition, the English dug a network of canals.

**IN INDIA AND CHINA** the rivers were so massive, and with such wide variation in water flow, that it was inadvisable to build power plants and factories along them using the technology of the day.

Fair enough, but why not then draw a comparison to Germany or France?

Tvedt himself writes elsewhere in the book that a hydropower-based textile industry began in Germany already in the 1700s, and that the English travelled to France to learn from the large canal project Canal du Midi in the 1600s.

**THAT BEING SAID**, Tvedt’s water-based framing of history opens up many surprising and exciting perspectives.

That Norwegian farmers were so free and self-sufficient had to do with, according to Tvedt, the fact that “the rain in Norway is democratic.” The drops fell on everyone, and there was no reason for large scale irrigation projects that would have made the farmers dependent on exploitative noblemen.

**TERJE TVEDT IS A** man who likes to swim against the current. When he comes up against a popular perception, he sees it as his calling to oppose it and bring nuance to the discussion.

In a time when colonialism and imperialism are being discussed in a context of “the West versus the rest,” Tvedt lists ten other empires that lasted at least as long as the British.

**HE CONTINUALLY REJECTS** claims that the idea that people should bend nature to their will is a western one, or that the Chinese are less innovative than people from the West.

The Chinese, after all, invented most things, including gunpowder.

**IN THE TUG-OF-WAR BETWEEN** China and the US, however, Tvedt is placing his bets on the Americans, because they are better at living with conflict.

The fact that the US is still the leading world power, despite becoming more and more dysfunctional politically, is for Tvedt proof of the country’s fundamental strength.

**TVEDT ALSO PLACES** a long historical perspective on the climate threat. Humanity has always lived with the threat of catastrophe.

The ancient story of the flood from the Bible is found in different variations in many cultures, and undoubtedly builds on real experiences. But this is no haven for climate deniers.

The paradox, as Tvedt sees it, is that real threats from nature must be met here and now. In addition, we can no longer go to the gods to seek explanations and help – humanity stands alone.

**TVEDT ENDS ON AN OPTIMISTIC NOTE**: there is no reason to “lose faith in humanity’s ability to change the world and itself.”

Despite his long throughlines and multifaceted perspectives, his book is short and concise. It can be read by anyone with the slightest interest in history.

**THIS IS NITPICKING**, but: China’s economy has not multiplied 50-fold in the past 30 years; an extra zero has likely been added here.

The footnotes are detailed, with several supplementary stories. This makes the main text more concise, although not everyone likes flipping back and forth.

Regardless, these objections are trivial against the thought-provoking experience of reading Terje Tvedt’s world history.

TOM HETLAND

Book reviewer