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Expansion Cycles in Competitive Systems

A Review of *Expansions: Competition and Conquest in Europe since the Bronze Age* by Axel Kristinsson (Reykjavikur Akademian, 2010)

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This is an extremely interesting book about some of the large patterns of European and world history. And I say that even though I'm not sure its central arguments fully work.

Axel Kristinsson is an independent Icelandic historian. He began his career as a specialist in medieval Icelandic history but eventually reacted against what he came to see as an excessively insular historiographical tradition. Instead, he began to think “about larger patterns in human history—something historians rarely do. I became a macro-historian, someone not just concerned with telling stories or explaining specific events but rather engaged in discovering general rules and patterns of human history—the laws of history, if you like” (p. vii). These interests led him to think about the relevance to human history of fields such as complexity theory or group selection. His book deliberately and systematically explores the possibilities of convergence between such scientific paradigms and aspects of human history.

History, he insists, is biology, so why should historians not seek the sort of large patterns or ‘laws’ that scientists habitually look for? Of course, such laws are not crudely deterministic. In fact, they cannot be. Historical laws, like many interesting scientific laws, will appear at the border between order and chaos for the very good reason that complex things must have structure, but if they are to evolve they also need a dash of chaos, just enough to allow for some unpredictable variations. Kristinsson cites the complexity theorist, Stuart Kauffman, who puts it beautifully: “How can life be contingent, unpredictable, and accidental while obeying general laws? The same question arises when we think about history. ... viewed on the most general level, living systems—cells, organisms, economies, societies—may all exhibit lawlike properties, yet be graced with a lacework of historical filigree, those wonderful details that could easily have been otherwise, whose very unlikelihood elicits our awed admiration” (p. 33, citing Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The*

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Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 19). In this spirit, Kristinsson pursues questions that have been off the radar for most historians for a long time, such as the extent to which biological parallels can help us understand the evolution of human societies.

His book attempts to tease out some large patterns in the histories of agrarian societies in Europe, since 1,000 BCE. Two large, linked patterns dominate the book and give it its title: (1) the histories of competitive systems, and (2) expansion cycles. By a competitive system, he means a group of neighboring polities that share many cultural features but engage in sustained competition, particularly military competition. He argues that such environments tend to be peculiarly dynamic, borrowing an idea that has been around for some time, for example in the work of Eric Jones and Charles Tilly and even in the thinking of Montesquieu (p. 23). He argues that his second big idea is more original: it is that competitive systems tend to generate cycles of demographic expansion and large scale migrations. He tracks these big themes both within societies organized at a tribal level ('barbarian' societies in his idiosyncratic, but carefully defended terminology) and at a state level ('civilized' societies). The book describes a series of expansion cycles generated within or at the borders of European competitive systems, over three thousand years. Some, such as the Urnfield expansion or that of the Gauls or ancient Germans, have to be tracked mainly through archaeology, while others include the expansionist phase of early modern European society up to the industrial revolution, for which we have much better evidence.

How do these cycles work? Given his focus on military competition it is no surprise that Kristinsson tends to see military innovation as the main trigger for expansion cycles. He posits two fundamentally different forms of warfare: elite warfare and mass warfare. Mass warfare emerges when new military technologies appear, such as the Greek phalanx, which require large armies and active military participation from significant sectors of society. Where mass armies are successful, he argues, they require some degree of democratization within society, and eventually within the entire competitive system. This is because mass armies empower sections of the population that had been politically marginal in eras dominated by elite warfare. In the more democratic environments associated with mass warfare, elites have to buy the support of 'soldier-farmers', and the best and most common way of doing this is by granting land. That is a mechanism that will often encourage both demographic expansion (by encouraging earlier marriage and larger families) and geographical and military expansion (in search of land and resources with which to reward soldier-farmers).

Such a brief summary cannot do justice to the care and intelligence with which Kristinsson describes the nuances of particular cycles, or his sensitivity to the danger of over-playing an interesting theoretical hand. The result of this argument is a series of extremely suggestive essays about several periods of

rapid change in European history over three millennia. The main question the book raises is, of course, whether these cycles are really there and whether they really are as important and as durable as Kristinsson argues.

It is here that many readers may start having some doubts. Specialists will undoubtedly want to quarrel with his accounts of particular eras and episodes, as I do with his very limited account of the origins of pastoralism (p. 86). But the really big problems emerge, I think, in the attempt to show that the same types of patterns can be identified in the pre-state societies of the ancient world, and the state-level societies of the last 1,000 years.

In the ancient world, the idea of a sort of democratization driven by the formation of mass armies makes lots of sense. In fact, it's a familiar way of thinking about the meaning of democracy in classical Greece (and even of broadly based 'tyrannies,' which he describes, aptly, as 'Bonapartist' systems). It's also plausible as a way of understanding some aspects of political structures in the 'barbarian' societies that eventually brought down the Roman empire. But whether the same idea works for the state-level societies of early modern Europe is much less certain. Looking for genuine 'democratization' and an associated expansion cycle in early modern European history as a result of changes in warfare is not that easy, and leads the author into tricky territory, such as the somewhat contrived argument that: "The emergence of the modern state had delayed the expansion cycle waiting to happen since the Late Middle Ages, but it did not eliminate the competitive pressure that eventually made it inevitable" (p. 282). In general, the final chapters on early modern Europe are the least satisfactory in the book, perhaps because the simple arguments that are plausible in a simpler era (and one with less historical evidence), look much less plausible in the extraordinarily complex and more richly sourced histories of Europe in the last millennium. Kristinsson is, after all, a historian of medieval Iceland, and he seems most comfortable discussing societies closer to that world.

Having said this let me return to the book's many virtues. Its core ideas are both interesting and illuminating. They are thought provoking even when they do not entirely work, because they are described clearly, deftly and intelligently, and they are defended, for the most part, with skill and panache. This is a fascinating book that should provoke much interesting debate even among historians not entirely persuaded by its central arguments.