

Winter 2017

## 'Civil Wars: A History in Ideas' by David Armitage (review)

Zachary C. Shirkey  
*CUNY Hunter College*

### [How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs)



Part of the [Intellectual History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Shirkey, Zachary C. 2018. "Review of David Armitage Civil Wars: A History in Ideas," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 48(3): 394–5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge. A penultimate chapter brings this horrific story relatively up to date with a recounting of the genocidal actions of despots and their acolytes in the Sudan and the South Sudan, Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia.

This sober survey of what historians should not neglect is a welcome overview of, and a guide to, events that need much more retrospective investigation and explication. There is nothing interdisciplinary about this book except for its subject matter. But that subject matter does help to remind us of aspects of the past that we may have overlooked, given short shrift, or simply avoided exploring. Now is a time to begin engaging in such a re-examination.

— R.I.R.

*Civil Wars: A History in Ideas.* By David Armitage (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017) 349 pp. \$27.95

Armitage's latest book is a history of modern Western thought about civil wars from the seventeenth century to the present day. He reasonably argues that such a work is valuable because most current wars are civil wars that tend to be long, deadly, prone to recurrence, and especially disruptive to the societies in which they are fought. He defends his Western focus by showing that Western thought has shaped the modern international norms and international institutions to which we look to address contemporary civil conflicts.

The book focuses especially on the English Civil War, the American Revolution, the U.S. Civil War, and the civil wars of the Roman Republic, though he discusses many other conflicts as well. Armitage cogently demonstrates that Roman thought regarding civil wars heavily influenced modern Western thinking on the subject. Some of the writers that he considers are Lucan, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Emer de Vattel, John Stuart Mill, Francis Lieber, and several modern social scientists.

Strikingly, writers across the entire period of his study wrestled with the same set of questions. What is civil war? Is it different from revolution, rebellion, or secession? When can outside states legitimately intervene in such internal conflicts? How does one square competing norms of human rights and sovereignty? Do the rules of international wars apply to civil wars? When is revolt against the government warranted and legitimate? Are some forms of government more prone to civil wars than others? Are there strategies to prevent recurrence, or are repeated civil wars inevitable?

What becomes apparent is that because the answers to most of these questions—especially what is civil war?—are inherently political in nature, they will always be contested. Armitage shows that all of the writers' conceptions of, and approaches to, understanding civil war were

shaped by the events of their day. Often their answers were designed to support specific policies and governments or to resolve specific problems faced by their societies. Thus, it is not surprising that today we are often unable to answer these questions because of their political implications.

What would be interesting, though it is clearly beyond the scope of the book, is the extent to which modern Western conceptions of civil war align with Chinese, Japanese, Islamic, Indian, or even medieval Western conceptions of civil war. Such a cross-cultural perspective might be fruitful in making progress on Armitage's thorny questions. If Armitage is right that any attempt to understand the concept of civil war has political implications, our struggle to understand civil war seems destined to continue.

Zachary C. Shirkey  
Hunter College  
City University of New York

*A Culture of Growth. The Origins of the Modern Economy.* By Joel Mokyr (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016) 403 pp. \$ 35.00

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Mokyr has been fascinated by the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution launched an unprecedented fast-forward movement in the welfare of mankind, a shift from "Smithian" to "Schumpeterian" growth. In influential and widely read previous books, Mokyr identified technology as the key element in that shift; now he is seeking to uncover the cultural roots of the new technology. Why, he asks in this book, did Europe manage to upgrade its technological culture from producing haphazard results in, say, 1500, to one of permanent improvement from around 1700?

Given that he is an economist, you might expect Mokyr to look for "incentives," but instead he concentrates on "attitudes," more specifically, ideas about harnessing nature to serve human needs. In five short chapters, Mokyr lays out the theoretical foundations for his inquiry. Borrowing from a range of social sciences as well as biology, he chooses an evolutionary approach in which ideas, not people, are the object of selection. He then adds "choice" as a variable; despite all kinds of constraints, people under the right conditions can choose between competing ideas. Those ideas come from geniuses that Mokyr calls "cultural entrepreneurs," running parallel with Schumpeter's innovating businessmen.

New ideas emerge randomly at all times and in all regions. How they become accepted as mainstream knowledge is the topic of the core set of chapters about "innovation, competition and pluralism in Europe" in which Mokyr creates a novel and highly successful combination of