



Empire of Chance: The Napoleonic Wars and the Disorder of Things

By Anders Engberg-Pedersen

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Napoleon's campaigns were the most complex military undertakings in history before the nineteenth century. But the defining battles of Austerlitz, Borodino, and Waterloo changed more than the nature of warfare. Concepts of chance, contingency, and probability became permanent fixtures in the West's understanding of how the world works. *Empire of Chance* examines anew the place of war in the history of Western thought, showing how the Napoleonic Wars inspired a new discourse on knowledge.

Soldiers returning from the battlefields were forced to reconsider basic questions about what it is possible to know and how decisions are made in a fog of imperfect knowledge. Artists and intellectuals came to see war as embodying modernity itself. The theory of war espoused in Carl von Clausewitz's classic treatise responded to contemporary developments in mathematics and philosophy, and the tools for solving military problems—maps, games, and simulations—became models for how to manage chance. On the other hand, the realist novels of Balzac, Stendhal, and Tolstoy questioned whether chance and contingency could ever be described or controlled.

As Anders Engberg-Pedersen makes clear, after Napoleon the state of war no longer appeared exceptional but normative. It became a prism that revealed the underlying operative logic determining the way society is ordered and unfolds.

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Editorial Review

Review

"One of the best books I've read in an age...It's a stunning achievement: beautifully written, meticulously argued, bristling with ideas and substantive insights." - Derek Gregory "geographicaliminations.com" (04/14/2015)

Empire of Chance: The Napoleonic Wars and the Disorder of Things is impressive both in its style and scope and in its penetration of difficult subject matters. The author argues cogently that the Napoleonic Wars motivated a shift in epistemological paradigms. He pays particular attention to the representation of space and parses the theoretical and aesthetic consequences of the transition from siege warfare to mobile armies, from geometry to topography. This is truly a wonderful book. (Elisabeth Krimmer, University of California, Davis)

Engberg-Pedersen's book can be characterized as an epistemological seismograph, registering, recording, and evaluating the tremors that the Napoleonic warfare sent through many fields of knowledge: military science, literature, philosophy, pedagogy, historiography, and cartography. It detects a radical transformation of the order of things in the period around 1800. But moving beyond Foucault, Engberg-Pedersen argues that this transformation installs not simply history, but chance as the organizing principle of modernity. He substantiates this argument with hitherto little known historical material (e.g. game design and military cartography), as well as with perceptive readings of canonical literary texts ranging from *Tristram Shandy* to vintage nineteenth-century European novels. All this is done in a style both lucid and elegant. (Chenxi Tang, University of California, Berkeley)

About the Author

Anders Engberg-Pedersen is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature in the Department for the Study of Culture at the University of Southern Denmark.

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