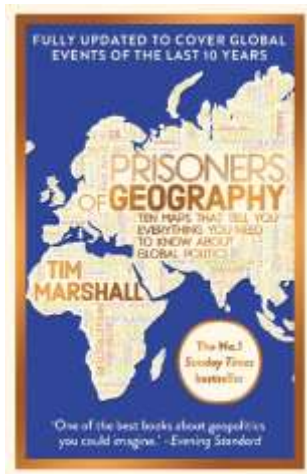




Review of Tim Marshall (2025) *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know about Global Politics*

London: Elliott & Thompson Limited. ISBN: 978-1-78396-859-6 (452 pages). www.eandtbooks.com

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What is my interest in Tim Marshall's (2025) *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know about Global Politics*? I have designed and taught an interdisciplinary Access course in social sciences for several years, and am constantly looking for works which would be useful to returning adult students at an entry level for higher education.

In the course, we cover 'politics' (and 'power') through the usual theoretical approaches (Aristotle; Hobbes; Locke; Arendt), and add a comparative approach to 'constitutions' by noting differences between countries and global locations. But after this I like to use the discipline of economic geography to question the role and influence of 'constitutions' and thus political theory in shaping the outcomes of a nation, region, or continents. The 'classic' argument in Western political science is that liberty and/or democracy will bring about prosperity - a 'claim' used to explain the 'material' ascendancy of European and North American countries in the 19th and 20th centuries (known as the Great Transformation). But, aren't there far more variables than a political constitution in explaining such outcomes?

Within this context, Marshall's book is pedagogically helpful, in a number of ways. Firstly, its main argument re-emphasises (10 times / 10 examples) the key role geography (both physical and socio-historic, or 'human') plays in shaping the fortunes of various countries. For instance, being able to retreat beyond the Urals (in its Asian territory) has consistently served Russia well; whilst China's locked-in location has left it with poor access to open oceans.

Secondly, the writing style is introductory and friendly - it is a fact-filled book and not onerous in terms of theories of 'international relations' (IR) nor reliant on (too much) prior geographic

knowledge. There are a few maps, but most readers would get the core intellectual points without spending too much effort in following charts.

Thirdly, it is up-to-date and reasonably priced (UK£10.99) without being over-reliant on contemporary information. By this I mean the argument mainly uses historical data to describe national predicaments, such that whilst some points will need 'updating' (the 2025 edition is a "fully updated and revised paperback edition", not a 'second') most of the arguments made should hold for a decade or two.

Fourthly, the work is acceptably 'rigorous' in providing a decent length bibliography (further reading) for each of the 10 chapters, which act as 'next steps' for students as well as supplying supporting information. Although, in-text referencing is not as 'pin-point' accurate, academically speaking, as I would like.

Fifthly, the book comes with a set of 'Questions' (at the end) and there is even a companion workbook of questions and answers. Both of which are excellent for use in teaching.

Where I would fault Marshall's approach is in terms of the authorial perspective. For the most part the position taken is 'neutral' and, sometimes, 'hermeneutic' (meaning Marshall gets into the shoes of the nations / regions he discusses: Russia; China; USA; Middle East). However, at other points Marshall slips into an uncritical 'Western' standpoint. For instance, he states (p.91): "China is not weighed down or motivated diplomatically or economically by human rights in its dealings with the world."

This statement, I would agree, is true for China. But has it not also been true of the USA and Western European imperialism? Thus, it is not Marshall's position on China that I would disagree with, but his underlying assumption that 'human rights' are something Western countries find themselves "weighed down" by. Really? In 2026 alone the USA has implemented mass deportations (without recourse to 'the law') and launched an unprovoked war on Iran (murdering 163 school girls on the first day). Let's not mention rendition (for CIA-authorized torture), the invasion of Iraq, nor the use of drones against (1) Afghani wedding parties nor (2) Venezuelan fishermen. Generally, Marshall's arguments about the impact of geographical features (including some historic borders which are not shaped by natural features, but human ones: walls/canals) are sound.

Another weakness is the low-key role given to 'money' (and thus some elements of economics) in the explanations, especially when the last 100 years have witnessed the subsumption of nearly all the world into a single monetary-enforced (economically compulsive) social system. Admittedly, some countries do better than others under the system 'due to' geographical advantages - but noting that athletes are running on an uneven track should not forget why they are involved in a competitive race in the first place.

Despite these issues, would I recommend *Prisoners of Geography* to my students? I would do so for those with an interest in global politics, international relations, and development studies. Whilst I might not agree with Marshall's Western-centric stance, the book nonetheless makes a great jumping-off point to get discussion going. And getting deliberation going is one teaching goal in foundation level education. Rather than thinking any work is going to provide a 'final word', classroom discussions need the kind of material Marshall presents to stimulate argument and counter-argument. And the latter is a pedagogical point I really want students to pick up. Overall, a factually interesting and motivating 'geography' for foundation (HE) teaching.