

The Rise of Western Power

PROLOGUE: WHY THE WEST?

A traveler to Baghdad around the year 1000 A.D. described a vast and flourishing city of broad streets and spacious gardens, abundant markets and marble-clad palaces, efficient sanitation and water-supply systems, innumerable mosques and thousands of watercraft, some from distant India and China docked along the Tigris River banks.¹ Córdoba, the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate in the Iberian peninsula, another of the world's biggest metropolises at a half-million people, boasted by far the richest library on the planet, vibrant commercial relations in every direction, and a reputed 1,000 mosques, including the grandest in the entire Islamic world, the Great Mosque with its 856 columns of polished stone. Scholars flocked to these and other Islamic centers of learning in search of wisdom and knowledge.² Four thousand miles to the east, the splendid capital of the dawning Song Dynasty, Kaifeng, soon bested Baghdad and Córdoba in population and wealth. The world's first economy to use paper currency, it produced iron at a rate achieved in Europe only 700 years later. Of this fabulously wealthy city, a resident a century or so later recalled 72 large and many more small restaurants where one could dine indoors or in pleasant gardens.³

In those same years, only two cities in all of Western Europe may have had around 40,000 inhabitants—Venice and Regensburg, Germany, then the capital of the Duchy of Bavaria.⁴ London, not yet the capital of England, and Paris, the capital of France only since 987 and still largely in ruin from the Norman siege of 885–886, were smaller still. These and other Western European cities were often just aggregations of parishes or small towns and villages still interspersed with forests, marshlands, fields, and vineyards. Here one presumably found few if any restaurants with pleasant gardens.

By contrast, in 1793 Great Britain's first envoy to China, 1st Earl Macartney, an otherwise sympathetic observer, noted the absence even in the richly decorated "houses of the better sort" of numerous conveniences to which the English were widely accustomed, such as dressers, light fixtures, mirrors, interior doors, bed sheets, table cloths, napkins, knives, forks, spoons, glasses, comfortable mattresses, and swift carriages.⁵ While it is quite likely that a Chinese traveler to Britain would have found much to deplore in its material culture, the contrast with Marco Polo's marveling at China's opulence 500 years prior is striking.⁶ Britain in particular and Western Europe in general—at least in their own eyes—had caught up materially to China and other advanced societies.⁷

A century later still, the West, especially Europe and North America, was without peer technologically and economically—something no one would have predicted in the year 1000. The West also brought to life a host of cherished goods, including representative government, the free enterprise system, individual liberties, modern

science, and the rule of law. When one takes into account the West's negative contributions to world history, such as the physical and cultural genocide of tens of millions of native peoples in the Americas, the systematic and dehumanizing Atlantic slave trade, an arrogant and often vicious worldwide imperialism, the Holocaust, and two frightfully destructive world wars, it is obvious that no other region, empire, culture, or civilization has ever left so powerful a mark upon the world.

How can one explain the unexpected rise of a small promontory at the end of the Eurasian land mass? My book aims to answer this question.

Some 15 years ago, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* showed that complex societies first emerged with writing, metallurgy, sophisticated technology, and specialized systems of government only in those regions well endowed by nature with domesticable plants and animals. The land from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Fertile Crescent boasted 32 of the world's 56 most productive wild grasses (compared to only six in East Asia), and four of the five major domesticated animals—sheep, goats, pigs, and cows—compared to only one in East Asia—a region far more richly endowed than other parts of the world.⁸ That is why civilization first emerged in West and East Asia and then spread to India, North Africa, and Europe. Yet Diamond failed to explain why of all the leading candidates for rapid and powerful advancement, only Europe broke away startlingly from the rest.

Scholars have offered two basic explanations for the West's rise: one material, the other cultural.⁹ Some scholars, including many world historians, emphasize economics, class conflict, control of natural resources, and imperialism. Europe rose, they argue, thanks to its close proximity to the Americas, subjugation of overseas colonies, rapaciousness, borrowing of technology and ideas from Asia, easy access to large coal and iron ore deposits, and violent militarism. The West did not triumph because of any cultural superiority. Its rise, moreover, was a mere temporary and quite late displacement of Asia. In the words of one historian, the West "used its American money [i.e. silver from mines in South America] to buy itself a ticket on the Asian train."¹⁰ China had remained richer, more populous, and generally more developed right down to the 1850s, when Europe finally achieved the number one position.¹¹ Although these factors help explain the West's rise, they do not account for its rapidity. It was as if the greatest juggernaut in history appeared out of nowhere.¹²

Others, often disparaged by their opponents as Eurocentrists,¹³ have pointed to Europe's cultural dynamism, inventiveness, openness to the outside world, intellectual curiosity, respect for individual rights, defense of private property, and the relatively high status of women. Many scholars with this basic outlook emphasize the influence of distinctive Western institutions, typically viewed as concrete manifestations of culture.¹⁴ Often important in such explanations is the political fragmentation of Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire and the subsequent powerful influence of the Christian Church.¹⁵ Among the interstices that opened between the church and various secular lords, all fighting for political and social dominance, there emerged, some argue, a uniquely vibrant and creative society in which individuals enjoyed great autonomy and associations banded together to advance their interests against powers and principalities. The West rose, in this perspective, because Europeans (and then also Americans and other Western settler peoples) unleashed human creativity more than any other civilization in history.¹⁶ Yet most of these interpretations fail



MAP 0.1 Eurasia: Earth's biggest and most interconnected landmass.

to credit adequately the contributions of other peoples to Europe's rise. From the perspective of such scholars, it was as if the West rose in a vacuum.

One strain of evolutionary biology helps to elucidate the nature of human creativity. Being alive and evolving over time means interacting with one's environment. All living things—from bacteria to humans—are phenomenally creative in their ability to adapt. At every moment, we must process almost infinite data relating to our surroundings and our own bodies and mental processes. We create from this manifold an awareness of our corner of the world.¹⁷ On this basis, we act, react, invent, build, and collaborate. If each individual displays such extraordinary creativity on its own, imagine how much vastly more he or she can achieve in communities. All human collectives—from hunter-gatherer bands to sophisticated civilizations—connect organically among themselves and with their environments. This alone makes them all worthy of the profoundest respect and even awe.

According therefore to an ecological model of evolution, no living thing can thrive in isolation but only in intricate interplay with the widest range of living and nonliving things.¹⁸ At various points in their development, however, the leaders of a host of cultures and civilizations found many reasons to impede further experimentation and innovation. One can point, for example, to decrees by the Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–1398) forbidding private voyages overseas and trade with foreign countries.¹⁹ Such prohibitions presumably hampered innovation; they could not stifle it altogether. China under the Ming Dynasty flourished in nearly every sphere.²⁰ Yet Europe, despite its smaller population, was rising faster, developing more ecologically, more organically—was more open to other cultures and to its physical environment—than the other great civilizations. Therein lay the secret of its success.

Yet why did Europe develop so organically? The key explanations are geographical, historical, and cultural. For tens of thousands of years, following the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, humans across the planet connected with their ecology in similarly creative ways. With the rise of urban culture and civilization several thousand years ago, however, diverse peoples established a wide variety of social patterns and political organizations. Communications and exchanges among them impelled much if not most human advancement. Thus, the peoples living on the earth's biggest and most interconnected landmass, Eurasia, had an advantage over all others (see Map 0.1). Partly for this reason, the most complex civilizations first arose there—specifically in Asia. Europe's position at the extreme opposite end from the world's richest and longest continuously thriving culture—China—was highly favorable: sufficiently isolated to avoid conquest, the European peoples nevertheless were exposed to insights, wisdom, technology, inventions, concepts, cultural achievements, religious visions, and knowledge from across Afro-Eurasia. A key fact was the Europeans' willingness to embrace these riches.

Europe itself is divided into many separate regions by an intricate web of waterways. They provide excellent transportation routes, but none was so important as to foster the development of a centralized state. On the contrary, Europe's geography favored political fragmentation.²¹ Aside from the unification of much of the continent in Roman times and three brief interludes of centralized rule by Charlemagne, Napoleon, and Hitler, Europe has been divided into dozens of highly independent polities. Intensive competition, exchange, interaction, and mutual emulation created hothouse conditions for innovation, the scale and vigor of which increased over time.

The cultural explanation for Europe's extraordinary openness to outside influences is more elusive, though is surely conditioned by its geography and history. Its peoples warred among themselves during the past thousand years more than the peoples of other regions—partly because so many of its founding cultures stemmed from the waves of nomadic warriors migrating across Eurasia. Goths, Huns, Vandals, Franks, and other aggressive, self-governing peoples formed the ruling elites for centuries throughout much of Europe. At the same time, European intellectuals embraced the rationalistic heritage of the Greeks, the Roman imperial model and conception of the individual person enshrined in both thought and law, and several key values handed down by Judaism and Christianity. These values placed spiritual and moral goods above material ones, advocated resistance to unjust authority, substituted linear to cyclical time, called people to the improvement and even the perfection of themselves and their institutions, insisted on the intrinsic goodness of material reality, and defined the universe as rational and the human mind is capable of understanding it.²² The absence of centralized rule enabled Europeans to challenge authority and pursue innovation and change in every sphere of life.

The Europeans' willingness to learn from others and to try new things began in the Middle Ages and then gradually increased in scale, scope, and intensity. Throughout the past thousand years, Europe was shaken repeatedly and, in later centuries, continuously by major transformations. Some were dramatic and swift; in other cases, small innovations gave way cumulatively to broader transformations. Over the centuries, they fused into a continuous transmutation,²³ like a controlled chain reaction, an extraordinary concatenation that continues through to our day: a human society hardwired for constant innovation and change.

The Europeans got their inventiveness from human nature: all people in the aggregate are equally ingenious. Their competitive spirit, aggressiveness, and ambition, however, came from accidents of geography, history, and culture. These factors made them successful economically and militarily, often terrifying and cruel to their enemies and horribly destructive of traditional cultures and societies, but also the founders of many cherished goods of the modern age: individual rights, acceptance of religious diversity, equality before the law, and gender equality. For millennia, people had learned to build upon past achievements. The European peoples benefited from this vast human patrimony and continued to add to it. In the midst of this development, however, their natural human creativity and inventiveness reached a critical mass of accomplishment that other peoples could not easily imitate both for technological reasons and because of commitments to value systems emphasizing communitarianism, closeness to nature, and spirituality, among others.

Far be it from me, however, to suggest or imply that the West's unique emergence to preeminence in the modern age overshadowed the achievements of other human cultures. Not only did many of those achievements make possible the West's rise; they deserve admiration in their own right. As Marshall Hodgson argued decades ago, whether the Islamic world "led to" anything evident in Modern times must be less important than the quality of its excellence as a vital human response and an irreplaceable human endeavor.²⁴ In other words, the great non-Western cultures have value both for their obvious influence on the emergence of the modern world and for their intrinsic worth as extraordinarily successful human ventures.

Definitions

Several key concepts—Europe, the West, Western civilization, and civilization—should be defined at the outset. “Europe” is not only a geographical entity but also a social construct. No natural boundary separates it from Asia, and many people disagree about what countries it encompasses; in particular, Russia’s inclusion is often seen as problematic.²⁵ Until the 1700s, Europe was usually called “Christendom,” a term that developed partly in opposition to the Islamic Middle East.²⁶ Geopolitics involving alliances with the Ottoman Empire and the secularizing thought of the Enlightenment gradually fostered a preference for “Europe.” Public intellectuals now began to scrutinize the nature of their continent.

Montesquieu was the first, in 1748, to delineate Europe “as a geographical, cultural, political, and intellectual entity with its own history and its own distinctive features.” In 1752, the Scottish philosopher David Hume emphasized the importance to European culture of a strong middle class. Four years later, Voltaire argued that several other features distinguished Western Europe from the Ottoman Empire, including climate, government, and religion, but especially the treatment of women. The European self-image that began to emerge thus highlighted temperate climate, political liberty, property rights, an aristocratic check on despotic government, a dynamic middle class, the relatively high status of women, scientific advancement, and later also economic prosperity.²⁷

Scholars have also defined Europe with reference to the cultural streams that influenced its development, including ancient Egyptian and Babylonian foundations, the Persian doctrine of good and evil, the Arabic lyric sensibility, Judeo-Christian ideals of self-examination and universal justice, Greek philosophy and the ideal of harmony, Celtic mysticism, Roman law and citizenship and ideals of empire, and Germanic self-governance, among many others.²⁸

One historian has pointed to specific movements that transformed Europe—such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, nationalism, imperialism, communism, fascism, and totalitarianism—as a way to characterize what it means to be European.²⁹ It is also possible to define Europe as those countries that participated in key historical events, such as the Crusades, the Age of Discovery, the Scientific Revolution, and the early development of mechanical printing, railroads, and political representation. To a large extent, the peoples from Portugal to Scotland, from Sweden to Poland, and from Russia to Gibraltar would fall under this classification. So would former European colonies like the United States and other lands considered part of the “West.”

The idea of the “West” as a geographical and cultural entity opposed to the “East” emerged in ancient Greece. European intellectuals later took up this idea, often with derogatory attitudes, as of a superior West and an inferior East.³⁰ In reaction, peoples of non-Western lands have rightly challenged such views.³¹ Such rhetorical disputes are unfortunate. Even so, the term “West” has come, often without any discussion or prejudice, to mean Europe, along with the United States and other European settler societies, like Canada and Australia.³² This is the sense implied here.

“Western civilization” has the same meaning in this book as “the West,” though it also has a long and often checkered past. One scholar dismisses the very idea as a

set of “intellectual constructs” devised for political and propaganda purposes.³³ Still, most historians consider it a valuable concept. The “Western Civ” course emerged in the United States since World War I.³⁴ With their European brethren slaughtering one another in the trenches, one could even say destroying their civilization (see Chapter 13), it seemed to many American academics that the essence of their culture had to be grounded in something better than modern European history. Scholars from several academic departments at Columbia University, therefore, anchored the development of the American ideals of liberty, the rule of law, political participation, and individual rights back through European history to ancient Greece and Rome or even ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Theirs was a vision of progress through time, which in an epoch of violent nationalism was meant “to keep civilization alive.”³⁵

Civilization can mean several things. First, high standards of behavior, politeness, manners, self-restraint, and the like, in the sense in which Norbert Elias understood the “civilizing process.”³⁶ Second, complex societies made possible by the domestication of plants and animals beginning 10,000 years ago and displaying sophisticated economies, cities, written language, sharply differentiated sociopolitical hierarchies, labor specialization and exploitation, multifaceted systems of mythology or religion, and significant artistic and scientific achievements.³⁷ Third, coherent cultural spheres in which all the members share some specific attributes, such as values, outlooks, historical consciousness, linguistic and ethnic affinities, social norms, and sometimes political unity.³⁸ A civilization in this sense is “a culture writ large,” such that “none of their constituent units can be fully understood without reference to the encompassing civilization.”³⁹ Such is how I understand “Western civilization” in the present book. The English historian Arnold Toynbee enumerated 21 distinct civilizations, from the Egyptian and Sumeric to the Chinese, Islamic, and Western, as well as the Andean and Mexic.⁴⁰ Naturally, scholars have compiled a wide variety of such lists.

Civilizations and cultures interact in many ways, both positive and negative. For example, their intermingling has stimulated innovation. William H. McNeill considers this the main source of progress in history.⁴¹ They have also collided. In the medieval and early modern period, Christian Europe and the nearby Muslim peoples defined each other as hostile camps—thus, the *Dar al-Islam* (territory of submission) and *Dar al-Harb* (territory of war), in Muslim terminology.⁴² Only in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries did some Muslims begin to view Europe as worthy of respect and emulation.⁴³ Early modern Europeans tended to be far more curious and well informed about the Islamic world, yet they were equally hostile to it.⁴⁴

Recent studies have illuminated these interactions in modern times. The American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington has identified eight major “civilizations,” of which the three most important to him are the West, China, and the Islamic world. What divides them and also unites each of them separately, he argues, is culture and, in particular, religion. Yet these cultures are so different, and the populations, resources, and territories encompassing them so great, that violent clashes between them are nearly inevitable.⁴⁵ The American political theorist Benjamin Barber has presented an equally grim analysis of the fate of civilizations. In his view, while many countries are fragmenting into petty religious and tribal enclaves perpetually at war with one another, much of the world is being transformed “into one homogenous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and commerce.”⁴⁶ One need not agree with either assessment to conclude that

understanding the past development and present configuration of world cultures is an urgent necessity. This book aims to contribute to this understanding by providing a comparative history of Western civilization, the most dynamic modern culture.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do world historians argue about the Rise of the West?

How do “Eurocentrists” explain it?

In what sense can we say Europe developed more ecologically than other cultures?

Why did the societies in Eurasia have an advantage over others?

How did political fragmentation influence Europe’s development?

What factors influenced the development of European culture?