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# Civilization

The West and the Rest

Niall Ferguson • Penguin Press © 2011 • 432 pages

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History / Economic History

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## Take-Aways

- Critics deride Western culture for its practice of slavery, colonialism and other atrocities.
- In truth, Europe and North America adapted better over time than other regions, leading to the current gap between “the West and the Rest” of the world.
- Western civilization advanced for six reasons: “competition,” scientific supremacy, property rights, medical breakthroughs, consumerism and “work ethic.”
- Rivalries among Western nations spurred exploration and innovation for centuries. The 20th-century rise of “total war” led to further advances in medicine and weaponry.
- America’s colonies distributed land ownership widely, creating upward mobility.
- Global life spans doubled in the past 200 years due to the miracles of Western medicine.
- Meanwhile, the Arab world sat out the “Scientific Revolution” (1530-1789) because Muslim clerics regarded scientific research as blasphemy that questioned God’s will.
- Eastern cultures of China and Japan turned inward, driven by protectionism.
- The Protestant work ethic played a major role in Western ascendancy.
- In the current era of Western dominance, consumerism has become a global force.

## Recommendation

Europeans and Americans have taken some shots in recent decades. Even the most patriotic Westerner feels some self-doubt about a history that includes slavery and imperialism. But here comes Harvard professor and historian Niall Ferguson to offer a bracing pep talk, shouting: “We’re the best thing that ever happened to the world!” Ferguson argues that European and North American dominance was a gift to the globe, particularly when the alternatives were the then-stagnant cultures of China, Japan and the Muslim-dominated Middle East. While acknowledging the two great sins of the Western world – slavery and Nazism – he puts a brave face on everything else. Even the 20th-century Western invention of “total war” produced progress because it spawned so many medical advances. Ferguson is deliberately provocative and sometimes rambles, but he is always compelling. *getAbstract* recommends his fresh perspective on history and his entertaining rebuke of political correctness about the “West and the Rest.”

## Summary

### The Mystery of Economic Development

According to conventional wisdom, “colonialism” is responsible for all that ails the world. Authors, historians, politicians, professors, activists and the citizenry of former colonies blame European ruthlessness for everything from African poverty to Middle Eastern conflict. Academics fashionably dismiss the accomplishments of half a millennium of Western dominance to focus on the bad – slavery, the Nazis, the slaughter of indigenous peoples and destructive wars – while ignoring the good – democracy, affluence, better health and longer lives. Such pejorative analysis crops up in Western universities and in the palaces of dictators like Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. Even Gandhi said European civilizations had no redeeming qualities. Populist theory claims that Europeans followed their greedy, brutal instincts to impose misery on all humanity. This sweeping denunciation is demonstrably wrong. European imperialism had its ugly aspects, but advances in the quality of human life and in longer life spans worldwide have offset them.

*“The West was Janus-faced: capable of nobility, yet also capable of turpitude.”*

Western primacy in modern history is striking, in part, because six centuries ago, the Black Death (1347-1351) decimated Europe, then “a miserable backwater” compared with eastern Asia. By 1500, western European nations were poorer and unhealthier, had fewer citizens, and were far less sophisticated than the societies of China and Japan. However, the Western world trounced its rivals in the coming centuries. Western civilization has dominated world culture for more than 500 years for logical reasons deriving from its strengths. Now, rising Asian economies are working to replicate the success of the West. China is poised to overtake the US as the world’s largest economy and Japan is already racing ahead of the UK. But Asian culture should recognize that Western ascendancy had little to do with Europe’s literature, art, architecture and music – the stuff of museums and college courses. The West rose up because its leaders were the first to figure out how to operate a market economy, how to run sewer pipes and how to cure diseases.

*“The rise of the West is...the pre-eminent historical phenomenon of the second half of the second millennium after Christ.”*

Europe dominated because it perfected the six “killer apps” of successful civilization:

### Killer App 1: “Competition”

Prior to 1400 – when Europe was a brutish boondock – China was an advanced civilization. Chinese inventors perfected plows, bridges, compasses, furnaces and many other tools long before Europeans figured them out. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the Chinese even played a game similar to golf. How did European societies come to surpass China? The answer is: Competition. In the early 1400s, China sent a fleet of massive ships across the Indian Ocean. The expedition, led by Admiral Zheng He, aimed to impress the world with China’s awe-inspiring technology, and the sailors indeed wowed the Africans they encountered. But Chinese ambitions soon withered, and, by 1424, China outlawed further oceanic exploration under penalty of death.

*“Most people in the past either died young or expected to die young, and those who did not were repeatedly bereft of those they loved, who did die young.”*

Europeans got a later start but a different motive impelled their voyages. Competing European nations strived for advantage over one another. Portuguese and Spanish explorers ruthlessly sought riches. European nations opened trade routes and carved out new colonies while China and Japan turned inward. China’s rigidly bureaucratic society adapted poorly to innovation, and the Japanese chose to insulate themselves. European nations competed with one another and learned from each other, becoming affluent while Asia stagnated. The differences manifested in divergent physical statures in the East and the West. Given a protein-rich diet, a typical 1600s English convict stood five feet seven inches tall; a typical Japanese soldier was just five foot two.

### Killer App 2: “Science”

The Islamic world led civilization in science for a time. The word “algebra” comes from the Arabic phrase *al-jabr*. The Abbasid caliphate (750-12) set up the first hospitals and translated Greek texts into Arabic. The “first truly experimental scientist” was a Muslim, Ibn al-Haytham. But Arab supremacy faded. As the Ottoman Empire declined in the late 1600s, Europe rose.

*“Unlike in the United States, where the constitution was designed to underpin ‘a government of laws, not of men,’ in Latin America, constitutions are used as instruments to subvert the rule of law itself.”*

Western society was better suited to the exchange of ideas and the acceptance of scientific breakthroughs. Separation of church and state was deeply ingrained in Europe, but in the Arab world, God’s law and political law were the same. The Scientific Revolution from 1530 to 1789 yielded hundreds of breakthroughs, including ways to apply chemistry to fight disease, the classification of minerals and the discovery of cells. This revolution took place in Europe, fueled by the printing press, which let scientists share and corroborate their discoveries. Now, nonscientists could read and understand their work. In Europe, Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo, René Descartes and Isaac Newton dominated their fields, but the Muslim world sat out the Scientific Revolution. Islamic clerics had argued for centuries that questioning God’s will through scientific research

was blasphemy. This taboo on intellectual curiosity held strong. Until the late 1700s, only one Western book had been translated into a Middle Eastern language.

*“The Scientific Revolution was, by any scientific measure, wholly Eurocentric.”*

Ottoman and European weapons were evenly matched in the 16th century, but for the next two centuries, Europeans continued to improve their lethal accuracy, while Ottoman technology stagnated. In the 1700s, the technology gap between the “West and the Rest” widened on a new front: weaponry. English mathematician Benjamin Robins applied physics and differential equations to explain how projectiles fly through the air. His work yielded egg-shaped bullets and a revolution in the effectiveness of European weaponry. The chasm has remained wide. Israel, which embraces Western innovation, uses science as the killer app that keeps it ahead of its enemies. In the 1980s and 1990s, Israelis filed for 7,652 patents, compared with only 367 for the entire Arab world. Muslim nations have begun to embrace science, with some Saudis backing education for girls and Iran working on becoming a nuclear power.

### Killer App 3: “Property Rights”

North America and Latin America diverge sharply over property rights. Poor English migrants escaping poverty settled in the United States, drawn by the promise of land and representative government. The Spanish conquistadores got a head start on the English colonists, reaching Mexico and Peru in the 1500s. Yet the Iberian goal of instant riches proved less sustainable than the English model of toil and thrift. Settlers never owned land in Latin America; it all belonged to the Spanish crown. These differing approaches shaped the two regions for centuries.

*“For all the best efforts of Ivy League economists and Irish rock stars, Africa remains the poor relation of the continents, reliant either on Western alms or on the extraction of its raw materials.”*

In South Carolina, for example, any settler willing to work could earn land, a logical incentive in a territory with plentiful real estate and scarce labor. Indentured servants – scorned as “the lowest of the low” – thus became property owners. The nascent American colonies were a hotbed of upward mobility – a society of farmers and merchants who valued religious tolerance and political freedom. By the 20th century, the US was the richest, most powerful nation in the world, the legacy of widely distributed wealth and commitment to democracy. Slavery is the one obvious blight on the North American love of property rights. The US Constitution established the “original sin of the new republic”: the right to own slaves.

*“Western Europe in 1411 [was] still plagued by bad sanitation and seemingly incessant war.”*

The Spanish New World encouraged slavery while functioning as an oligarchy. A fortunate few explorers enjoyed most of the spoils, while members of the working class were lucky to win a small plot of land. The Catholic Church held a religious monopoly. The most prominent Latin freedom fighter was Simón Bolívar, who helped lead Venezuela to independence. Venezuela’s first constitution gave the vote only to an elite class of property owners; just 1% of the population owned nearly all the land. US colonists had been practicing democracy for years, but Venezuelan freedom fighters had little preparation for self-governance. Latin

America suffered two chaotic centuries, featuring revolution, coups d'état, poverty and inequality. Since gaining independence in 1811, Venezuela has cycled through a total of 26 constitutions; the US has had only one. Latin American society suffered and continues to suffer from concentrated wealth and authoritarian governments.

### **Killer App 4: “Medicine”**

For much of recorded time, people died after brief lives. Henry V and Mozart died at 35, Franz Schubert at 31 and Blaise Pascal at 39. From 1540 through 1800, Londoners averaged only 37 years of life. By 2001, worldwide life expectancies reached 66.6 years. This improvement in longevity springs from the miracles of Western medicine.

*“Perhaps the greatest mystery of the entire Cold War is why the Worker’s Paradise could not manage to produce a decent pair of jeans.”*

For all of the ugliness associated with European colonialism in Africa, medical care improved during colonial rule and fell apart as the conquerors left. In order for France to civilize Senegal, French explorers had to protect themselves from malaria, sleeping sickness and other tropical diseases. Colonial exploration into Africa’s immunologically hazardous jungles spurred many medical advances that fell apart when the conquerors left. Destructive weaponry and the rise of “total war” created the demand for battlefield medicine. World War I led to innovations in trauma treatment, including blood transfusions and skin grafts. Just as slavery was a blight on the civilizing influence of property rights, Nazi racists victimized and murdered millions in Europe and Africa.

### **Killer App 5: “The Consumer Society”**

During the era of Western dominance, consumerism became a global force. People everywhere wanted blue jeans and popular music, two mundane products that hold great political power. The Industrial Revolution had set the stage for an age of mass consumption. As it took hold, political philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels dismissed capitalism as an unfair, unsustainable system. They misread economic reality. New Western factories created wealth that trickled down to the consumer classes. Marx and Engels’ theories lay the groundwork for Soviet communism, but their philosophy was no match for Western consumerism.

*“The consumer society is so all-pervasive today that it is easy to assume it has always existed.”*

After World War II, Americans became strikingly affluent. Air conditioning, clothes dryers and color televisions were common in the US by the early 1970s. Denim pants came to symbolize sex, youth, rebellion and individualism. Those living under Soviet communism enjoyed few symbols of success, and the state specifically banned blue jeans – so they became a much-desired symbol of dissidence behind the Iron Curtain. To ward off the threat posed by Levi’s, Soviet police began enforcing “jeans crimes.” Still, the Soviets couldn’t forestall Western pop culture’s influence. East Germans watched West German TV and coveted their neighbors’ forbidden consumer goods. When the Cold War ended in 1989, Levi’s, Coke and other Western brands received credit for their role in thwarting the Soviets. The clothing wars continue:

Today, the Muslim world considers Western garb decadent and immodest, and France has banned the burka.

## Killer App 6: “Protestant Work Ethic”

For centuries, North Americans and Northern Europeans have numbered among the world’s hardest-working folks. They’ve generated affluence, attained high levels of education and built dominant brands. As late as the 1990s, five Western powers – the US, the UK, Germany, France and Canada – churned out fully 44% of global manufacturing. In four of the five, Protestant Christianity was the dominant religious force. North America – colonized by Protestant Englishmen – thrived; Latin America – settled by Iberian Catholics – struggled. Early Americans worked hard and pinched pennies; they believed that God desired such sober behavior. Protestants also preached that material gains fulfilled the will of God.

*“Real estate plus representation: that was the North American dream.”*

China’s stifling Confucianism contributed to its stagnation as European powers seized new territory. The Muslim world’s religious dictates shut out scientific and technological innovation, while Protestantism promoted the work, thrift, affluence and literacy that spurred the Industrial Revolution. Today, many Europeans have lost their religion: In Germany, France and the Netherlands, only about 10% of the nations’ inhabitants report that God is “very important” to them. While religion remains a force in the US, Americans seldom follow the Puritan ideal of delayed gratification. During the housing bubble, Americans spent far more than they made as they cashed out their phantom home equity. While Westerners spend, Asians save. If this pattern continues, will the cycle of Eastern dominance return?

## About the Author

Harvard University historian and professor **Niall Ferguson**’s numerous previous books include *Paper and Iron*, *The House of Rothschild*, *The Cash Nexus*, *Empire* and *The Ascent of Money*.



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