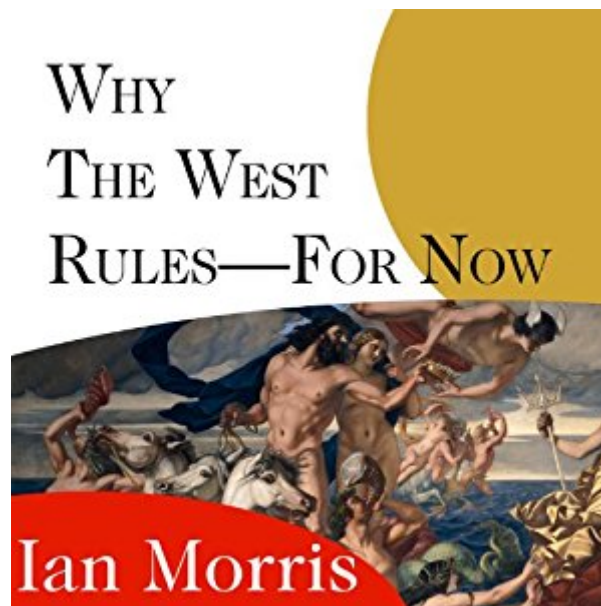


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Why The West Rules - For Now: The Patterns Of History, And What They Reveal About The Future



Synopsis

Sometime around 1750, English entrepreneurs unleashed the astounding energies of steam and coal, and the world was forever changed. The emergence of factories, railroads, and gunboats propelled the West's rise to power in the nineteenth century, and the development of computers and nuclear weapons in the 20th century secured its global supremacy. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, many worry that the emerging economic power of China and India spells the end of the West as a superpower. In order to understand this possibility, we need to look back in time. Why has the West dominated the globe for the past 200 years, and will its power last? Describing the patterns of human history, the archaeologist and historian Ian Morris offers surprising new answers to both questions. It is not, he reveals, differences of race or culture, or even the strivings of great individuals that explain Western dominance. It is the effects of geography on the everyday efforts of ordinary people as they deal with crises of resources, disease, migration, and climate. As geography and human ingenuity continue to interact, the world will change in astonishing ways, transforming Western rule in the process. Deeply researched and brilliantly argued, *Why the West Rules - for Now* spans 50,000 years of history and offers fresh insights on nearly every page. The book brings together the latest findings across disciplines - from ancient history to neuroscience - not only to explain why the West came to rule the world but also to predict what the future will bring in the next hundred years.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As can be seen by both the summary and various book reviews, this is big history,

encompassing the dawn of the first homonids (or ape-men as the author put it) to present day, with a chapter conjecturing about the future. I was going to try and compare it to some of books in the same genre that I have read, but this book takes, disproves and/ or builds on their arguments - books such as Kennedy's Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, Jared Diamond's Guns, Germs and Steel, Pommeranz's the Great Divergence, Landes' The Wealth and Poverty of Nations - and they are all cited in his book and Morris takes pains to show how they only focus on one small piece of the picture. Indeed the feeling of reading this must have been similar for those who read Marx's Das Kapital for the first time (although the language is much more accessible and the conclusion is open ended) in that it attempts to set out underlying laws of history. In the words of the author - "History is not one damn thing after another, it is a single grand and relentless process of adaptations to the world that always generate new problems (in the form of disease, famine, climate change, migration and state failure) that call for further adaptations. And each breakthrough came not as a result of tinkering but as a result of desperate times, calling for desperate measures." There may be set backs and hard ceilings, with free will and culture being the wildcards that may hinder social development but eventually the conditions give rise to ideas that allow progress to be made. Indeed the motor of progress is not some economic logic, but what he calls the Morris Theorem - (expanding an idea from the great SF writer Robert Heinlein) to explain the course of history - Change is caused by lazy, greedy frightened people (who rarely know what they are doing) looking for easier more profitable and safer ways to do things. And it is geography that is the key determining factor where something develops first - Maps, not Chaps. Now all this sounds academic and boring and in the case of the Morris theorem a little oversimplistic, but the presentation definitely is not. As professor Jared Diamond states, it is like an exciting novel (told by a cool eccentric uncle) and he uses a wide range of popular media to support his case, at one point talking about the movies Back to the Future, 300, the Scorpion King or making references to novels such as the Bonesetter's Daughter and Clan of the Cave bear to bring conditions to life. Indeed the emotional similarities (and sheer sense of fun!) to playing early versions of the Sid Meier's Civilization Computer Game are uncanny. There is a wide range of material here to satisfy a range of interests - his summaries of the fossil record, and early middle eastern and Chinese history are succinct and clear. Especially on the Chinese side, I had to read 2 books - the Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology and the Cambridge History of Ancient China to gain the same understanding of what he summarizes in about 7-8 pages. He discourses on the role of the Axial religions, on whether democracy was important to the rule of the west, the role of free will in history, and on provocative ideas like the Qin and Roman empires exemplifying what he calls the paradox of

violence: when the rivers of blood dried, their imperialism left most people, in the west and the east better off. I could go on and on and, of course, there may be many experts who take issue with his interpretations (and his predictions) but it will definitely stimulate thinking. If I had to make a criticism of the book - it is that, like Marx, it is fundamentally materialistic in its approach, ideas are like memes that facilitate social development and culture is something that can help or hinder development but has no value in itself. The great religious ideas are glossed over as a product of or reaction to their times. It has precious little to say about the spiritual life and spiritual discoveries such as ethics, meditation or psychology. It may be these discoveries and qualities that will be required to get us through the challenges - of climate change, overpopulation, resource shortages and potential nuclear war. It is worthwhile comparing the book to two writings that he cites as inspiration (1) Herbert Spencer - *Progress its Law and Cause* and (2) Isaac Azimov's *Foundation* series. In each case they try to identify the forces that drive humanity but Spencer just doesn't have the data in the 19th century and the historian Hari Seldon is joke amongst professional historians as the novels seem so implausibly optimistic about what history can do. I don't know if Ian Morris has succeeded in identifying the laws of history but this book could only have been written now, at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, drawing together the strains from archaeology, genetics, linguistics as well as sociology and economics to create something altogether new and wonderful and accessible to that elusive thing - the educated lay reader.

It is hard to decide how many stars to assign to this book. Ian Morris' book would deserve 5 stars if it were merely a world history book. It succeeds in creating a unified, comprehensible narrative of world history from the stone age to the present day in a way that no other book I am aware of has done. For this reason, it would deserve to be classified as a classic. However, on the other hand, the aim of Ian Morris has not been to write a comprehensive history of the the major world civilizations from the stone age to the present. It has been to explain the Western predominance of the last centuries and to predict what the future will look like. His discussion of the future is quite admirable and thoughtful indeed. However, I have found his answer to the central question the book poses to fall below ordinary academic standards on two fronts: it trivializes the question, and lacks novelty.¹ It trivializes the question. The central question of the book is answered by an argument of geographic reductionism and determinism. In short, the Western "rule" of the last few centuries is attributed to the shorter breadth of the Atlantic Ocean as opposed to the Pacific. This shorter breadth made the Americas more easily accessible to Europeans than to Asians, hence the former created an Atlantic economy, therefore faced different challenges than the latter, responded to them

by the scientific and industrial revolutions, and hence rule. I find this argument to be rather simplistic, and I do not think that there was a need to write such a long book if its sole purpose was to put this argument down (after all, it has been said before - see below). The problem with this argument is that it stops exactly where the truly important questions should be asked. A case in point is Columbus: the author makes fun of him, calling him the best candidate for a "bungling idiot", because he thought he had arrived to the (by then obsolete) "land of the Great Khan", while he had only reached Cuba. However, the author fails to notice that Columbus did not reach the Americas merely due to the short breadth of the Atlantic Ocean: he ventured in the open sea aiming to sail as long as it took him to reach the other end of Eurasia, knowing that he should end up there eventually. Even if he had to cross the Pacific instead of the Atlantic, there is a high chance he would make it. It is surprising that, while the author tackles so many "what if" scenarios to prove his thesis, he fails to consider this fundamental "what if" question for his main argument: Would Columbus fail to reach the Americas if he had had to cross the Pacific instead? Given that Magellan did cross both the Atlantic and the Pacific a few years later, the answer appears to be in the negative. This observation by itself appears sufficient to refute the author's trivial main argument. The same reasoning applies to several other arguments in the book. For example, the author tries to argue that Newton thought what he thought because of the Atlantic economy, and he has no room for any cultural factor in it; he maintains that "each age gets the thought it needs". In essence, he maintains that thought is geographically determined. I find this fancy argument hard to accept, as I have not seen any convincing evidence for it. Last, but not least, some of the claims in the book are factually wrong: he attributes the invention of the wheelbarrow to China and claims that it was brought to Europe in the Middle Ages; however, there is evidence of wheelbarrows in construction sites in Ancient Athens.² It lacks novelty. The central argument of geographic reductionism and determinism that Ian Morris espouses is not new. It has been made by Jared Diamond in "Guns, Germs, and Steel" and by J. M. Blaut in "Eight Eurocentric Historians" before. Surprisingly, the author fails to give proper credit to these authors for making similar arguments, although he does at least cite Diamond. Moreover, the so-called "advantage of backwardness" of Western Europe, which forms a secondary argument in the author's thesis, has also been made by Patricia Crone in "Pre-industrial Societies". At least Morris does a good job of bringing these arguments together in a coherent way, but does not go beyond them to deeper issues that need to be addressed (as discussed above).

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