

**Following Your Reading, Be Prepared to Explain How Ferguson:**

1. Refutes the idea that all civilizations are equal
2. Supports the idea that Western civilization is the template for the world
3. Illustrates the idea that human beings are becoming more like "us", meaning Westerners
4. Refutes the thesis that imperialism explains Western dominance
5. Deals with other theories explaining Western dominance: geography, genetics, and culture
6. Explains what distinguished the West from the rest of the world

**Written Response:**

Write a one-paragraph response to Bernard Porter's comment on Ferguson's

book. State whether you agree or disagree with this statement:

“(Ferguson) must know that his is only one way of looking at modern world history ... far to the right of the political spectrum, and consequently highly unsuited to be taught to children... It reads like propaganda.”

**Ferguson, Niall. 2011. *Civilization: The West and the Rest.* London: Allen Lane Publishers.**

If, in the year 1411, you had been able to circumnavigate the globe, you would probably have been most impressed with the quality of life in Oriental civilizations. The Forbidden City was under construction in Ming Beijing, while work had begun on reopening and improving the Grand Canal; in the Near East, the Ottomans were closing in on Constantinople, which they would finally capture in 1453. The Byzantine Empire was breathing its last. The death of the warlord Timur (Tamerlane) in 1405 had removed the recurrent threat of murderous invading hordes from Central Asia – the antithesis of civilization. For the Yongle Emperor in China and the Ottoman Sultan Murad II, the future was bright.

By contrast. Western Europe in 1411 would have struck you as a miserable backwater, recuperating from the ravages of the Black Death - which had reduced population by as much as half as it swept eastwards between 1347 and 1351 - and still plagued by bad sanitation and seemingly incessant war. In England the leper king Henry IV was on the throne, having successfully overthrown and murdered the ill-starred Richard II.

France was in the grip of internecine warfare between the followers of the Duke of Burgundy and those of the assassinated Duke of Orleans. The Anglo-French Hundred Years' War was just about to resume. The other quarrelsome kingdoms of Western Europe -Aragon, Castile, Navarre, Portugal and Scotland - would have seemed little better. A Muslim still ruled in Granada. The Scottish King, James I, was a prisoner in England, having been captured by English pirates. The most prosperous parts of Europe were in fact the North Italian city-states: Florence, Genoa, Pisa, Siena and Venice.

As for fifteenth century North America, it was an anarchic wilderness compared with the realms of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas in Central and South America, with their towering temples and skyscraping roads. By the end of your world tour, the notion that the West might come to dominate the Rest for most of the next half-millennium would have come to seem wildly fanciful.

And yet it happened.

For some reason, beginning in the late fifteenth century, the little states of Western Europe, with their bastardized linguistic borrowings from Latin (and a little Greek), their religion derived from the teachings of a Jew from Nazareth and their intellectual debts to Oriental mathematics, astronomy and technology, produced a civilization capable not only of conquering the great Oriental empires and subjugating Africa, the Americas and Australasia, but also of converting peoples all over the world to the Western way of life — a conversion achieved ultimately more by the word than by the sword.

There are those who dispute that, claiming that all civilizations are in some sense equal, and that the West cannot claim superiority over, say, the East of Eurasia. But such relativism is demonstrably absurd. No previous civilization had ever achieved such dominance as the West achieved over the Rest. In 1500 the future imperial powers of Europe accounted for about 10 per cent of the world's land surface and at most 16 per cent of its population. By 1913, eleven Western empires controlled nearly three-fifths of all territory and population and more than three-quarters (a staggering 79 per cent) of global economic output.

Average life expectancy in England was nearly twice what it was in India. Higher living standards in the West were also reflected in a better diet, even for agricultural labourers, and taller stature, even for ordinary soldiers and convicts. Civilization, as we have seen, is about cities.

By this measure, too, the West had come out on top. In 1500, as far as we can work out, the biggest city in the world was Beijing, with a population of between 600,000 and 700,000. Of the ten largest cities in the world by that time only one -Paris - was European, and its population numbered fewer than 200,000. London had perhaps 50,000 inhabitants. Urbanization rates were also higher in North Africa and South America than in Europe.

Yet by 1900 there had been an astonishing reversal. Only one of the world's ten largest cities at that time was Asian and that was Tokyo. With a population of around 6.5 million, London was the global megalopolis. Nor did Western dominance end with the decline and fall of the European empires. The rise of the United States saw the gap between West and East widen still further. By 1990 the average American was seventy-three times richer than the average Chinese.

Moreover, it became clear in the second half of the twentieth century that the only way to close that yawning gap in income was for Eastern societies to follow Japan's example in adopting some (though not all) of the West's institutions and modes of operation. As a result, Western civilization became a kind of template for the way the rest of the world aspired to organize itself. Prior to 1945, of course, there was a variety of developmental models - or operating systems, to draw a metaphor from computing - that could be adopted by non-Western societies. But the most attractive were all of European origin: liberal capitalism, National Socialism, Soviet communism.

The Second World War killed the second in Europe, though it lived on under assumed names in many developing countries. The collapse of the Soviet empire between 1989 and 1991 killed the third. To be sure, there has been much talk in the wake of the global financial crisis about alternative Asian economic models. But not even the most ardent cultural relativist is recommending a return to the institutions of the Ming dynasty or the Mughals.

The current debate between the proponents of free markets and those of state intervention is, at root, a debate between identifiably Western schools of thought: the followers of Adam Smith and those of John Maynard Keynes, with a few die-hard devotees of Karl Marx still plugging away. The birthplaces of all three speak for themselves: Kirkcaldy, Cambridge, Trier.

In practice, most of the world is now integrated into a Western economic system in which, as Smith recommended, the market sets most of the prices and determines the flow of trade and division of labour, but government plays a role closer to the one envisaged by Keynes, intervening to try to smooth the business cycle and reduce income inequality.

As for non-economic institutions, there is no debate worth having. All over the world, universities are converging on Western norms. The same is true of the way medical science is organized, from rarefied research all the way through to front-line healthcare.

Most people now accept the great scientific truths revealed by Newton, Darwin and Einstein and, even if they do not, they still reach eagerly for the products of Western pharmacology at the first symptom of influenza or bronchitis. Only a few societies continue to resist the encroachment of Western patterns of marketing and consumption, as well as the Western lifestyle itself. More and more human beings eat a Western diet, wear Western clothes and live in Western housing.

Even the peculiarly Western way of work — five or six days a week from 9 until 5, with two or three weeks of holiday - is becoming a kind of universal standard. Meanwhile, the religion that Western missionaries sought to export to the rest of the world is followed by a third of mankind -as well as making remarkable gains in the world's most populous country. Even the atheism pioneered in the West is making impressive headway.

With every passing year, more and more human beings shop like us, study like us, stay healthy (or unhealthy) like us and pray (or don't pray) like us. Burgers, Bunsen burners, Band-Aids, baseball caps and Bibles: you cannot easily get away from them, wherever you may go. Only in the realm of political institutions does there remain significant global diversity, with a wide range of governments around the world resisting the idea of the rule of law, with its protection of individual rights, as the foundation for meaningful representative government. It is as much as a political ideology as a religion that a militant Islam seeks to resist the advance of the late twentieth-century Western norms of gender equality and sexual freedom.

So it is not 'Eurocentrism' or (anti-)'Orientalism' to say that the rise of Western civilization is the single most important historical phenomenon of the second half of the second millennium after Christ. It is a statement of the obvious. The challenge is to explain how it happened. What was it about the civilization of Western Europe after the fifteenth century that allowed it to trump the outwardly superior empires of the Orient?

Clearly, it was something more than the beauty of the Sistine Chapel.

The facile, if not tautological, answer to the question is that the West dominated the Rest because of imperialism. There are still many people today who can work themselves up into a state of high moral indignation over the misdeeds of the European empires. Misdeeds there certainly were, and they are not absent from these pages. It is also clear that different forms of colonization - settlement versus extraction - had very different long-term impacts.

But empire is not a historically sufficient explanation of Western predominance. There were empires long before the imperialism denounced by the Marxist-Leninists. Indeed, the sixteenth century saw a number of Asian empires increase significantly in their power and extent. Meanwhile, after the failure of Charles V's project of a grand Habsburg Empire stretching from Spain through the Low Countries to Germany, Europe grew more fragmented than ever. The Reformation unleashed more than a century of European wars of religion.

A sixteenth-century traveller could hardly have failed to notice the contrast. In addition to covering Anatolia, Egypt, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Yemen, the Ottoman Empire under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66) extended into the Balkans and Hungary, menacing the gates of Vienna in 1529. Further east, the Safavid Empire under Abbas I (1587-1629) stretched all the way from Isfahan and Tabriz to Kandahar, while Northern India from Delhi to Bengal was ruled by the mighty Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605). Ming China, too, seemed serene and secure behind the Great Wall.

Few European visitors to the court of the Wanii Emperor (1572-162,0) can have anticipated the fall of his dynasty less than three decades after his death. Writing from Istanbul in the late 1550s, the Flemish diplomat Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq -the man who transplanted tulips from Turkey to the Netherlands -nervously compared Europe's fractured state with the 'vast wealth' of the Ottoman Empire. True, the sixteenth century was a time of hectic European activity overseas.

But to the great Oriental empires the Portuguese and Dutch seafarers seemed the very opposite of bearers of civilization; they were merely the latest barbarians to menace the Middle Kingdom, if anything more loathsome - and certainly more malodorous - than the pirates of Japan. And what else attracted Europeans to Asia but the superior quality of Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain?

As late as 1683, an Ottoman army could march to the gates of Vienna - the capital of the Habsburg Empire - and demand that the city's population surrender and convert to Islam. It was only after the raising of the siege that Christendom could begin slowly rolling back Ottoman power in Central and Eastern Europe through the Balkans towards the Bosphorus, and it took many years before any European empire could match the achievements of Oriental imperialism.

The 'great divergence' between the West and the Rest was even slower to materialise elsewhere. The material gap between North and South America was not firmly established until well into the nineteenth century, and most of Africa was not subjugated by Europeans beyond a few coastal strips until the early twentieth.

If Western ascendancy cannot therefore be explained in the tired old terms of imperialism, was it simply - as some scholars maintain - a matter of good luck? Was it the geography or the climate of the western end of Eurasia that made the great divergence happen? Were the Europeans just fortunate to stumble across the islands of the Caribbean, so ideally suited to the cultivation of calorie-rich sugar? Did the New World provide Europe with 'ghost acres' that China lacked?

And was it just sod's law that made China's coal deposits harder to mine and transport than Europe's? Or was China in some sense a victim of its own success - stuck in a 'high-level equilibrium trap' by the ability of its cultivators to provide a vast number of people with just enough calories to live?

Can it really be that England became the first industrial nation mainly because bad sanitation and disease kept life exceptionally short for the majority of people, giving the rich and enterprising minority a better chance to pass on their genes?

The immortal English lexicographer Samuel Johnson rejected all such contingent explanations for Western ascendancy. In his *History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia,* published in 1759, he has Rasselas ask:

By what means ... are the Europeans thus powerful? or why, since they can so easily visit Asia and Africa for trade or conquest, cannot the Asiaticks and Africans invade their coasts, plant colonies in their ports, and give laws to their natural princes? The same wind that carries them back would bring us thither.

To which the philosopher Imlac replies:

They are more powerful. Sir, than we, because they are wiser; knowledge will always predominate over ignorance, as man governs the other animals. But why their knowledge is more than ours, I know not what reason can be given, but the unsearchable will of the Supreme Being.

Knowledge is indeed power if it provides superior ways of sailing ships, digging up minerals, firing guns and curing sickness. But is it in fact the case that Europeans were more knowledgeable than other people? Perhaps by 1759 they were; scientific innovation for around two and a half centuries after 1650 was almost exclusively Western in origin. But in 1500? As we shall see, Chinese technology, Indian mathematics and Arab astronomy had been far ahead for centuries.

Was it therefore a more nebulous cultural difference that equipped Europeans to leap ahead of their Oriental counterparts? That was the argument made by the German sociologist Max Weber. It comes in many variants - medieval English individualism, humanism and the Protestant ethic - and it has been sought everywhere from the wills of English farmers to the account books of Mediterranean merchants and the rules of etiquette of royal courts.

In *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations,* David Landes made the cultural case by arguing that Western Europe led the world in developing autonomous intellectual inquiry, the scientific method of verification and the rationalization of research and its diffusion. Yet even he allowed that something more was required for that mode of operation to flourish: financial intermediaries and good government.

The key, it becomes ever more apparent, lies with institutions. Institutions are, of course, in some sense the products of culture. But, because they formalize a set of norms, institutions are often the things that keep a culture honest, determining how far it is conducive to good behaviour rather than bad. To illustrate the point, the twentieth century ran a series of experiments, imposing quite different institutions on two sets of Germans (in West and East), two sets of Koreans (in North and South) and two sets of Chinese (inside and outside the People's Republic). The results were very striking and the lesson crystal clear. If you take the same people, with more or less the same culture, and impose communist institutions on one group and capitalist institutions on another, almost immediately there will be a divergence in the way they behave.

Many historians today would agree that there were few really profound differences between the eastern and western ends of Eurasia in the 1500s. Both regions were early adopters of agriculture, market-based exchange and urban-centred state structures.

But there was one crucial institutional difference. In China a monolithic empire had been consolidated, while Europe remained politically fragmented. In *Guns, Germs and* *Steel,* Jared Diamond explained why Eurasia had advanced ahead of the rest of the world. But not until his essay 'How to Get Rich' (1999) did he offer an answer to the question of why one end of Eurasia forged so far ahead of the other. The answer was that, in the plains of Eastern Eurasia, monolithic Oriental empires stifled innovation, while in mountainous, river-divided Western Eurasia, multiple monarchies and city-states engaged in creative competition and communication.

It is an appealing answer. And yet it cannot be a sufficient one. Look only at the two series of engravings entitled *Miseries of War,* published by the Lorraine artist Jacques Callot in the 1630s as if to warn the rest of the world of the dangers of religious conflict.

The competition between and within Europe's petty states in the first half of the seventeenth century was disastrous, depopulating large tracts of Central Europe as well as plunging the British Isles into more than a century of recurrent, debilitating strife.

Political fragmentation often has that effect. If you doubt it, ask the inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia. Competition is certainly a part of the story of Western ascendancy, as we shall see in chapter one - but only a part.

**In this book I want to show that what distinguished the West from the Rest – the mainsprings of global power - were six identifiably novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas and behaviours. For the sake of simplicity, I summarize them under six headings:**

**1. Competition**

**2. Science**

**3. Property Rights**

**4. Medicine**

**5. The Consumer Society**

**6. The Work Ethic**

To use the language of today's computerized, synchronized world, these were the six killer applications - the killer apps - that allowed a minority of mankind originating on the western edge of Eurasia to dominate the world for the better part of 500 years.

Now, before you indignantly write to me objecting that I have missed out some crucial aspect of Western ascendancy, such as capitalism or freedom or democracy (or for that matter guns, germs and steel), please read the following brief definitions:

1. Competition - a decentralization of both political and economic life, which created the launch-pad for both nation-states and capitalism
2. Science - a way of studying, understanding and ultimately changing the natural world, which gave the West (among other things) a major military advantage over the Rest
3. Property Rights — the rule of law as a means of protecting private owners and peacefully resolving disputes between them, which formed the basis for the most stable form of representative government
4. Medicine — a branch of science that allowed a major improvement in health and life expectancy, beginning in Western societies, but also in their colonies
5. The Consumer Society - a mode of material living in which the production and purchase of clothing and other consumer goods play a central economic role, and without which the Industrial Revolution would have been unsustainable
6. The Work Ethic - a moral framework and mode of activity derivable from (among other sources) Protestant Christianity, which provides the glue for the dynamic and potentially unstable society created by apps 1 to 5

Make no mistake: this is not another self-satisfied version of 'The Triumph of the West'. I want to show that it was not just Western superiority that led to the conquest and colonization of so much of the rest of the world; it was also the fortuitous weakness of the West's rivals. In the 1640s, for example, a combination of fiscal and monetary crisis, climate change and epidemic disease unleashed rebellion and the final crisis of the Ming dynasty. This had nothing to do with the West. Likewise, the political and military decline of the Ottoman Empire was internally driven more than it was externally imposed. North American political institutions flourished as South America's festered; but Simon Bolivar's failure to create a United States of Latin America was not the gringo's fault.

The critical point is that the differential between the West and the Rest was institutional. Western Europe overtook China partly because in the West there was more competition in both the political and the economic spheres. Austria, Prussia and latterly even Russia became more effective administratively and militarily because the network that produced the Scientific Revolution arose in the Christian but not in the Muslim world.

The reason North America's ex-colonies did so much better than South America's was because British settlers established a completely different system of property rights and political representation in the North from those built by Spaniards and Portuguese in the South. (The North was an 'open access order', rather than a closed one run in the interests of rent-seeking, exclusive elites.) European empires were able to penetrate Africa not just because they had the Maxim gun; they also devised vaccines against tropical diseases to which Africans were just as vulnerable.

In the same way, the earlier industrialization of the West reflected institutional advantages: the possibility of a mass consumer society existed in the British Isles well before the advent and spread of steam power or the factory system. Even after industrial technology was almost universally available, the differential between the West and the Rest persisted; indeed, it grew wider. With wholly standardized cotton spinning and weaving machinery, the European or North American worker was still able to work more productively, and his capitalist employer to accumulate wealth more rapidly, than their Oriental counterparts. Investment in public health and public education paid big dividends; where there was none, people stayed poor.

This book is about all these differences - why they existed and why they mattered so much.