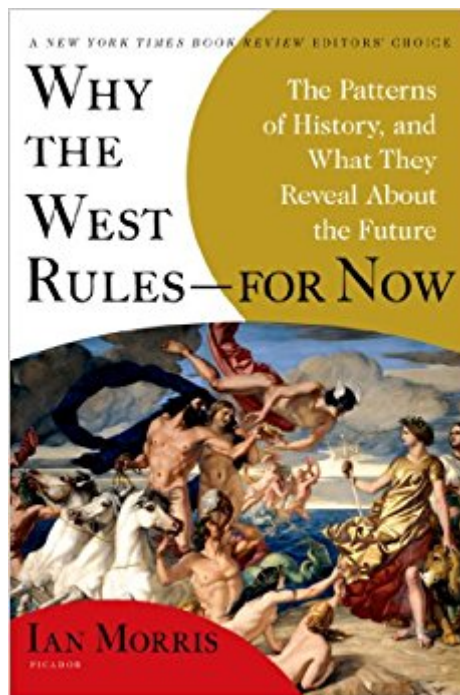




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Why The West Rules--for Now: The Patterns Of History, And What They Reveal About The Future



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book for 2011 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 twentieth century secured its global supremacy. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first 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 two hundred 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 fifty thousand 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.

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Customer Reviews

Only the supremely self-confident put forth all-encompassing theories of world history, and Morris is one such daredevil. An archaeologist by academic specialty, he advances a quasi-deterministic construct that is suitable for nonacademics. From a repeatedly enunciated premise that humans by nature are indolent, avaricious, and fearful, Morris holds that such traits, when combined with sociology and geography, explain history right from the beginning, when humanity trudged out of Africa, through the contemporary rivalry between China and America. Such temporal range leaves scant room for individual human agency: Morris names the names of world history, but in his narrative, leaders and tyrants, at best, muddle through patterns of history that are beyond their power to shape. And those patterns, he claims, can be numerically measured by a "social development index" that he applies to every epochal change from agriculture to the industrial revolution. However, the reading is not as heavy as it may sound. His breezy style and what-if imagination for alternative scenarios should maintain audience interest; whether his sweeping perspective convinces is another matter altogether. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Morris is a lucid thinker and a fine writer. . . possessed of a welcome sense of humor that helps him guide us through this grand game of history as if he were an erudite sportscaster." • "Orville Schell, The New York Times Book Review" "An excellent and amusing survey of the last [fifty] thousand years or so of human history." • "Jane Smiley, The Washington Post" "The greatest nonfiction book written in recent times." • "The Business Standard" "A pathbreaking work that lays out what modern history should look like." | "Entertaining and plausibly argued." • "Harold James, Financial Times (London)" "In an era when cautious academics too often confine themselves to niggling discussions of pipsqueak topics, it is a joy to see a scholar take a bold crack at explaining the vast sweep of human progress. . . Readers of *Why the West Rules--For Now* are unlikely to see the history of the world in quite the same way ever again. And that can't be said of many books on any topic. Morris has penned a tour de force." • "Keith Monroe, The Virginian-Pilot" "Readers of *Why the West Rules--For Now* are unlikely to see the history of the world in quite the same way ever again. And that can't be said of many books on any topic. Morris has penned a tour de force." • "Keith Monroe, The Virginian-Pilot" "If you read one history book this year, if you read one this decade, this is the one." • "Tim O'Connell, The Florida Times-Union" "A monumental effort... Morris is an engaging writer with deep insights from archaeology and ancient history that offer us compelling visions about how the past influences the future." • "Michael D. Langan, Buffalo News" "A remarkable book that may come to be as widely

read as Paul Kennedy's 1987 work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Like Mr Kennedy's epic, Mr Morris's *Why the West Rules--For Now* uses history and an overarching theory to address the anxieties of the present . . . This is an important book--one that challenges, stimulates and entertains. Anyone who does not believe there are lessons to be learned from history should start here.

• The Economist • Morris' new book illustrates perfectly why one really scholarly book about the past is worth a hundred fanciful works of futurology. Morris is the world's most talented ancient historian, a man as much at home with state-of-the-art archaeology as with the classics as they used to be studied . . . He has brilliantly pulled off what few modern academics would dare to attempt: a single-volume history of the world that offers a bold and original answer to the question, Why did the societies that make up 'the West' pull ahead of 'the Rest' not once but twice, and most spectacularly in the modern era after around 1500? Wearing his impressive erudition lightly -- indeed, writing with a wit and clarity that will delight the lay reader -- Morris uses his own ingenious index of social development as the basis for his answer.

• Niall Ferguson, Foreign Affairs • A formidable, richly engrossing effort to determine why Western institutions dominate the world . . . Readers will enjoy [Morris's] lively prose and impressive combination of scholarship . . . with economics and science. A superior contribution to the grand-theory-of-human-history genre.

• Kirkus Reviews (starred review) • Ian Morris has returned history to the position it once held: no longer a series of dusty debates, nor simple stories--although he has many stories to tell and tells them brilliantly--but a true *magister vitae*, a 'teacher of life.' Morris explains how the shadowy East-West divide came about, why it really does matter, and how one day it might end up. His vision is dazzling, and his prose irresistible. Everyone from Sheffield to Shanghai who wants to know not only how they came to be who and where they are but where their children and their children's children might one day end up must read this book.

• Anthony Pagden, author of *Worlds and War: The 2,500-Year Struggle Between East and West* • This is an astonishing work by Ian Morris: hundreds of pages of the latest information dealing with every aspect of change. Then, the questions of the future: What will a new distribution bring about? Will Europe undergo a major change? Will the millions of immigrants impose a new set of rules on the rest? There was a time when Europe could absorb any and all newcomers. Now the newcomers may dictate the terms. The West may continue to rule, but the rule may be very different.

• David S. Landes, author of *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* • Here you have three books wrapped into one: an exciting novel that happens to be true; an entertaining but thorough historical account of everything important that happened to any important people in the last ten millennia; and an educated guess about what will happen in the future. Read, learn, and

enjoy!â • â •Jared Diamond, Professor of Geography at UCLA, and Pulitzer Prizeâ “winning author of Guns, Germs, and Steel, Collapse, and Natural Experiments of Historyâ œIan Morris is a classical archaeologist, an ancient historian, and a writer whose breathtaking vision and scope make him fit to be ranked alongside the likes of Jared Diamond and David Landes. His magnum opus is a tour not just d’horizon but de force, taking us on a spectacular journey to and from the two nodal cores of the Euramerican West and the Asian East, alighting and reflecting as suggestively upon 10,800 BC as upon AD 2010. The shape of globalizing history may well never be quite the same again.â • â •Paul Cartledge, A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture, Clare Collegeâ œAt last--a brilliant historian with a light touch. We should all rejoice.â • â •John Julius Norwichâ œDeeply thought-provoking and engagingly lively, broad in sweep and precise in detail.â • â •Jonathan Fenby, author of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Presentâ œMorris’s history of world dominance sparkles as much with exotic ideas as with extraordinary tales. Why the West Rules--for Now is both a riveting drama and a major step toward an integrated theory of history.â • â •Richard Wrangham, author of Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Humanâ œThe nearest thing to a unified field theory of history we are ever likely to get. With wit and wisdom, Ian Morris deploys the techniques and insights of the new ancient history to address the biggest of all historical questions: Why on earth did the West beat the Rest? I loved it.â • â •Niall Ferguson, author of The Ascent of Money

As can be seen by both the summary and various book reviews, this is big history, encompassing the dawn of the first hominids (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 Bone Setters 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 Asimov'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.

I enjoyed the broad sweep of history this book provided. Too often in history we study a small part of the world and don't see what was going on in other parts of the world at the same time. This book gives a better idea as to how the overall world looked at different points in history. The book is easy to read and thought provoking. It can be read as a companion book to Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

This is one of the most interesting books I have read, summarizing a vast amount of research in archeology, biology, sociology, and geography. Those interested in thinking about patterns in history and comparing East and West, and various empires within East and West, will find this book quite thought provoking. The book hinges on an index of social development the author uses throughout the book to compare different societies over different periods. His appendix explains how he developed this index, and also contains a sensitivity analysis of the key variables that comprise his index, to argue that his index is unlikely to be so far off that it distorts the patterns of history and societies as he has described them throughout the book. The book is quite detailed and for that reason general readers may not enjoy it. But anyone who wants an overview of research in many social science fields should find this book quite interesting. The only mistake I found was on page 510. While the Wright brothers had their first flight in North Carolina, they were from Dayton, Ohio, and only went to North Carolina because of the high winds near the ocean at Kittyhawk, and because the sand dunes there were conducive to their experiments with gliders and then powered aircraft. But this mistake is minor and does not diminish the great accomplishment Dr. Morris has achieved in this most interesting book. Now his other books are on my reading list.

Gives a millennia-long view, comparing the history of "the West" (essentially from the Atlantic to India) to that of "the East" (ca. China and Japan). Morris ties this together with his quantitative "social development scale" (I doubt its validity), showing whether West or East is ahead at various earlier epochs, sort of treating it like a horse race. Usually the West leads, but there are times, especially during Europe's "dark ages," when the East pulls ahead. The industrialization of the past

two centuries put the West -- at least Europe and its descendant, the US -- firmly in the lead, but Morris predicts that East will pull ahead in 2113. He invokes a lot of "just so" stories to explain various changes in the race. Good to read as an overview, but don't take it all seriously.

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