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## BOOKSHELF

# The Birth of the Modern World

Six 'killer apps' made the West a source of economic dynamism and political stability

By **BRENDAN SIMMS**

October 29, 2011

Niall Ferguson begins "Civilization" with a question posed by Samuel Johnson in "Rasselas" (1759), his philosophical romance. "By what means," Johnson has his prince-protagonist ask, "are the Europeans thus powerful? 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 answer, his interlocutor replies, is that Europeans "are more powerful . . . 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." Mr. Ferguson, dissatisfied with the explanatory power of divine providence, resolves to dig deeper for an answer.

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### DETAILS

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#### **Civilization: The West and the Rest**

By Niall Ferguson

Penguin Press, 402 pages, \$35

The first thing he notes is that Western dominance was by no means so clear-cut at the start of his story in the early 15th century. At that time, he says, Europe would have struck observers as a "miserable backwater," recovering from the plague and divided into petty kingdoms. By contrast, imperial China

was in full bloom, sending expeditions as far afield as eastern Africa, while the Ottomans were relentlessly advancing on central Europe through the Balkans.

Three hundred years later, by the time of "Rasselas," the situation was reversed. China had succumbed to the Mongols and then to stagnation, while the Ottomans had been repulsed before the walls of Vienna and were well on their way to becoming the "sick man" of Europe. The western European states, by contrast, had shown themselves capable of projecting power thousands of miles beyond their borders, seizing colonies in



Consumerism: A woman shops in a supermarket, circa 1950. POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

the east and settling vast tracts of North and South America. They had shown themselves, as well, superior in the crucial fields of resource extraction and war fighting. The gap between the West and "the rest" was to widen still more over the following 300 years.

Mr. Ferguson explains these successes by noting the crucial role of what he calls the West's "killer apps." The first, he says, was competition. On Mr. Ferguson's reading, political and economic decentralization made nation-states

and capitalism possible. It was the intense rivalries between Western powers that gave them the edge over non-Europeans, whose realms were vast and stagnant.

The second app, Mr. Ferguson argues, was the growth of science, which gave the West a way of understanding and conquering nature. The result was a leap in military technology, among much else. The third was property rights defined by law, which, he says, led to stable representative government. The fourth was the triumph of Western medicine, which not only improved productivity and life expectancy but also enabled Europeans to cope with colonial climes. The fifth app was the development of consumer society, creating a demand that fueled economic growth. The sixth and final app was the West's work ethic, which held together the potentially fissiparous society produced by



Medicine: A boy receives a polio vaccine. *AL FENN/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES*

the first five.

Lest anybody think that Mr. Ferguson's analysis is just another exercise in Anglo-Saxon triumphalism, it should be noted that his discussion includes Continental Europe.

One of his most forceful chapters contrasts the rise of the enlightened Frederick

the Great, who turned the sandbox of Brandenburg into a major power, with the simultaneous decline of the Ottomans under Osman III. To those who decry any resulting "Eurocentrism" in the book, Mr. Ferguson has a simple and effective response. His key moments in the rise of civilization undoubtedly took place in Europe and were inconceivable anywhere else: the scientific revolution in a "hexagon bounded by Glasgow, Copenhagen, Krakow, Naples, Marseille and Plymouth"; the invention of the printing press in western Germany; the Industrial Revolution—Mr. Ferguson prefers the term "evolution"—in England.



Science: A radio telescope listening to sound from space. *FRITZ GORO/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES*

Moreover, "the rest" have paid the West the ultimate compliment of imitation. Mr. Ferguson shows that the most successful non-Western polities are those that have

"downloaded" the six apps. At the top of the class is Japan, whose Western-style armies prevailed over Russia in 1905 and whose politics and economics were rebuilt so effectively after the catastrophe of 1945. A smaller, but no less spectacular, example is Israel, whose Western political, military and economic structures have allowed it to prevail against much larger Arab enemies. In an inspired passage, Mr. Ferguson, following Siegmund Warburg, compares the Jewish state to a 20th-century "Prussia," for finding the internal strength to deal with an encircling coalition. Both Japan and Israel must now be reckoned part of the West.

Mr. Ferguson does not claim that the six-app software will work with all socio-cultural hardware. The list of "resterners" for whom the connection broke—or who managed only a partial download—is long. It includes the Ottoman Empire, imperial China, czarist Russia and, more recently, the shah's Iran.

Remarkably, Mr. Ferguson notes, the most serious challenges to the West have come not from the outside but from within: for example, Hitler's Germany and Soviet Russia. Communism was a Eurocentric critique of capitalism, designed to deal with Western problems of industrialization, not those of largely agrarian 20th-century Russia and China. Mr. Ferguson reminds us that, despite the rhetoric, the Cold War was not a struggle between East and West but "between two rival Wests, a capitalist one and a communist one."

The road to the triumph of the West has not been without its twists and turns. Slavery, Mr. Ferguson notes, remained an integral part of Western politics until the 19th century, and its aftereffects were still obvious in the American South as recently as the 1960s. Today the dominance of the West is increasingly being challenged by the global economic crisis and particularly by the rise of China. Here Mr. Ferguson is upbeat, ending the book with the reflection that the "western package still seems to offer human societies the best available set of economic, social and political institutions—the ones most likely to unleash the individual human creativity capable of solving the problems the twenty-first century world faces."

Mr. Ferguson tells his story with characteristic verve and an eye for the felicitous phrase. China, the "Middle Kingdom," becomes the "mediocre kingdom" for its failure to innovate and modernize; American popular culture goes from "ragtime to riches"; and we should "beware of Greeks bearing debts." Only occasionally does the style of "Civilization" echo that of the accompanying British TV series, with staccato two-word sentences that work better on-screen than on the printed page.

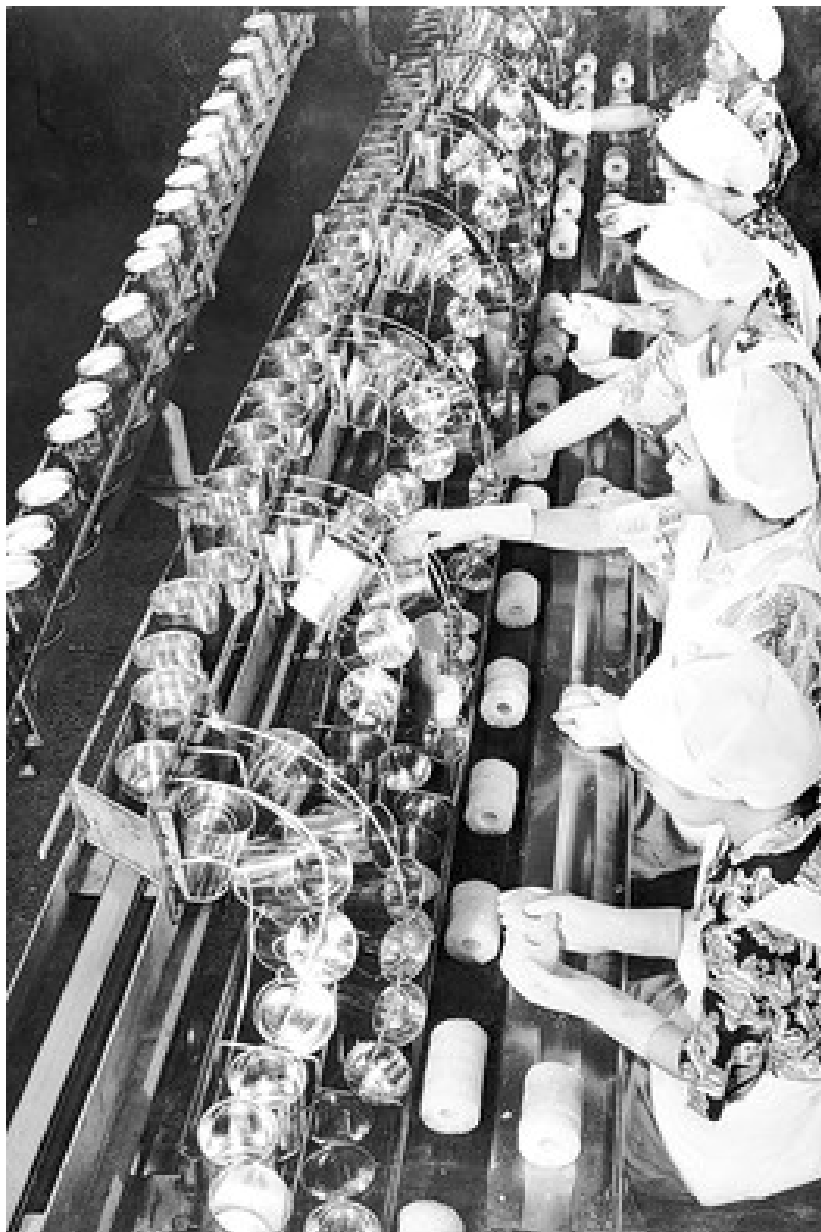
Inevitably in a work of this scope, there are some weaknesses. Mr. Ferguson mentions the importance of representative government, to be sure, but his emphasis is on the economic, cultural and technological superiority of the West. Democracy, as such, does not figure in his six "killer apps," and yet if there is one characteristic that has been written into the Western DNA since feudalism it is participation and accountability. When Japan vanquished Russia in 1905, its victory was widely understood by Westerners, not least by President Theodore Roosevelt, as the triumph of constitutionalism over autocracy.

Thus even if "the rest" had found a better economic model (and they haven't), such an achievement would be no argument for what Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore has called "Asian" authoritarian political values. As U.S. neoconservatives argued in the 1970s, when the economic performance of capitalism and communism was still being debated, the difference between Westerners and the subjects of the Soviet Union was not that one was rich while the other was poor but that "we are free and they are not."

The other Western feature that Mr. Ferguson rather glosses over is the quest for union. Here he is led astray by his concept of "competition," which may be the key to economic health but does not transfer straightforwardly to the political sphere. After all, the U.S. Constitution was drawn up in 1787 precisely because the Founding Fathers feared the effects of unchecked competition among the states, especially over western lands. It is thus surprising that Mr. Ferguson makes virtually no mention of the European Union, which for better or worse has been the most important politico-economic innovation that the Continent has produced in the past 50 years.

Work: Packers at a fruit factory circa 1955. *THREE LIONS/GETTY IMAGES*

Though an eloquent champion, Mr. Ferguson actually undersells the strength of Western civilization. The slavery he laments was indeed a terrible sin, but slavery has been a characteristic of almost every society since time immemorial; it is Western abolitionism, beginning in the late 18th century, that was distinctive. Slavery was endemic in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans, who had stamped it out by the early 20th



century. After the Europeans left, slavery returned, as many Sudanese are finding to their cost today.

With Mr. Ferguson, we can agree that the crimes of the West should be balanced against its much greater achievements. We can go a step further, too, and celebrate the fact that the West is unique among civilizations in its self-critique: Where it finds or brings disease, of whatever kind, it also, in time, provides a cure.

*—Mr. Simms is the author of "Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire."*



Competition: A man advertising a diamond store in 1948. *KEN O'BRIEN COLLECTION/CORBIS*



Rule of Law: A housing development. *JOSEPH SCHERSCHEL/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES*

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