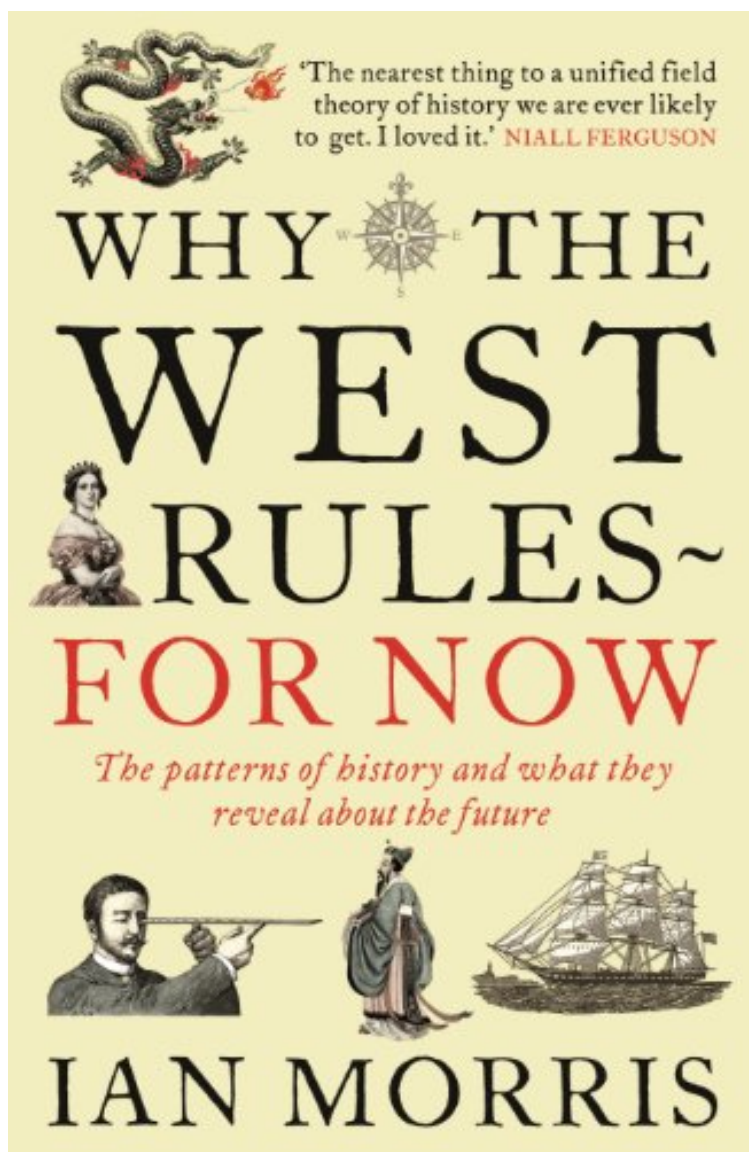


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Why The West Rules--For Now



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhy did British boats shoot their way up the Yangzi in 1842, rather than Chinese ones up the Thames? Why do Easterners use English more than Europeans speak in Mandarin or Japanese? To put it bluntly, why does the West rule? There are two schools of thought: the 'Long-Term Lock In' theory, suggesting some sort of inevitability, and the 'Short-Term Accident' theory. But both approaches have misunderstood the shape of history.Ian Morris presents a startling new theory. He explains with flair and authority why the paths of development differed in the East and West and - analysing a vicious twist in trajectories just ahead of us - predicts when the West's lead will come to an end.'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 10 millennia; and an educated guess about what will happen in the future. Read, learn, and enjoy!' Jared Diamond 'A great work of synthesis and argument, drawing together an awesome range of materials and authorities to bring us a fresh, sharp reading of East-West relationships.' Andrew Marr

BEFORE EAST AND WEST WHAT IS THE WEST? When a man is tired of London, said Samuel Johnson, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford. It was 1777, and every current of thought, every bright new invention, was energizing Dr. Johnson's hometown. London had cathedrals and palaces, parks and rivers, mansions and slums. Above all, it had things to buy things beyond the wildest imaginings of previous generations. Fine ladies and gentlemen could alight from carriages outside the new arcades of Oxford Street, there to seek out novelties like the umbrella, an invention of the 1760s that the British soon judged indispensable; or the handbag, or toothpaste, both of them products of the same decade. And it was not just the rich who indulged in this new culture of consumption. To the horror of conservatives, tradesmen were spending hours in coffee shops, the poor were calling tea a necessary, and farmers' wives were buying pianos. The British were beginning to feel they were not like other people. In 1776 the Scottish sage Adam Smith had called them a nation of shopkeepers in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, but he had meant it as a compliment; Britons regard for their own well-being, Smith insisted, was making everyone richer. Just think, he said, of the contrast between Britain and China. China had been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous, countries of the world, but had already acquired that full complement of riches which the measure of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire. The Chinese, in short, were stuck. The competition of the labourers and the interest of the masters, Smith predicted, would soon reduce them to the lowest rate which is consistent with common humanity, with the consequence that the poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggarly nations in Europe. . . . Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome food to the people of other countries. Johnson and Smith had a point. Although the industrial revolution had barely begun in the 1770s, average incomes were already higher and more evenly distributed in England than in China. Long-term lock-in theories of Western rule often start from this fact: the West's lead, they argue, was a cause rather than a consequence of the industrial revolution, and we need to look back further in time perhaps much further to explain it. Or do we? The historian Kenneth Pomeranz, whose book *The Great Divergence* I mentioned in the introduction, insists that Adam Smith and all the cheerleaders for the West who followed him were actually comparing the wrong things. China is as big and as varied, Pomeranz points out, as the whole continent of Europe. We should not be too surprised, then, that if we single out England, which was Europe's most developed region in Smith's day, and compare it with the average level of development in the whole of China, England scores higher. By the same token, if we turned things around and compared the Yangzi Delta (the most developed part of China in the 1770s) with the average level of development across the whole of Europe, the Yangzi Delta would score higher. Pomeranz argues that eighteenth-century England and the Yangzi Delta had more in common with each other (incipient industrialism, booming markets, complex divisions of labor) than England did with underdeveloped parts of Europe or the Yangzi Delta did with underdeveloped parts of China all of which leads him to conclude that long-term theorists get things back-to-front because their thinking has been sloppy. If England and the Yangzi Delta were so similar in the eighteenth century, Pomeranz observes, the explanation for Western rule must lie after this date, not before it. One implication is clear: if we want to know why the West rules, we first need to know what the West is. As soon as we ask that question, though, things get messy. Most of us have a gut feeling about what constitutes the West. Some people equate it with democracy and freedom; others with Christianity; others still with secular rationalism. In fact, the historian Norman Davies has found no fewer than twelve ways that academics define the West, united only by what he calls their elastic geography. Each definition gives the West a different shape, creating exactly the kind of confusion that Pomeranz complains about. The West, says Davies, can be defined by its advocates in almost any way that they think fit, meaning that when we get right down to it, Western civilization is essentially an amalgam of intellectual constructs which were designed to further the interests of their authors. If Davies is right, asking why the West rules means nothing more than arbitrarily picking some value to define the West, claiming that a particular set of countries exemplifies this value, then comparing that set with an equally arbitrary set of non-Western countries to reach whatever self-serving conclusions we like. Anyone who disagrees with our conclusions can simply choose a different value to exemplify Westernness, a different set of countries exemplifying it, and a different comparison set,

coming naturally to a different but equally self-serving conclusion. This would be pointless, so I want to take a different approach. Instead of starting at the end of the process, making assumptions about what count as Western values and then looking back through time to find their roots, I will start at the beginning. I will move forward through time from the beginning until we reach a point at which we can see distinctive ways of life emerging in different parts of the world. I will then call the westernmost of these distinctive regions the West and the easternmost the East, treating West and East for what they are geographical labels, not value judgments. Saying we must start at the beginning is one thing; finding it is another altogether. As we will see, there are several points in the distant past at which scholars have been tempted to define East and West in terms of biology, rejecting the argument I made in the introduction that folks (in large groups) are all much the same and instead seeing the people in one part of the world as genetically superior to everyone else. There are also points when it would be all too easy to conclude that one region has, since time immemorial, been culturally superior to all others. We must look into these ideas carefully, because if we make a misstep here at the start we will also get everything about the shape of the past, and therefore about the shape of the future, too, wrong.

IN THE BEGINNING Every culture has had its own story about how things started, but in the last few years astrophysicists have given us some new, scientific versions. Most experts now think time and space began over 13 billion years ago, although they do not agree on just how that happened. The dominant inflationary theory holds that the universe initially expanded faster than the speed of light from an infinitely dense and infinitely small point, while a rival cyclical theory argues that it blew up when a previous universe collapsed. Both schools agree that our universe is still expanding, but while inflationists say it will continue to grow, the stars will go out, and eventually infinite darkness and coldness will descend, cyclicists claim it will shrink back on itself, explode again, and start another new universe. It is hard to make much sense of these theories unless you have had years of advanced mathematical training, but fortunately our question does not require us to begin quite so early. There could be neither East nor West when there were no directions at all and when the laws of nature did not exist. Nor could East and West be useful concepts before our sun and planet took shape 4.5 billion years ago. Perhaps we can speak of East and West once the earth's crust formed, or at least once the continents reached something like their current positions, by which point we are already into the last few million years. Really, though, all these discussions are beside the point: East and West cannot mean anything for the question in this book until we add another ingredient to the mix: humans.

Paleoanthropologists, who study early humans, like controversy even more than historians do. Their field is young and fast moving, and new discoveries constantly turn established truths on their heads. If you get two paleoanthropologists into a room they are likely to come out with three theories of human evolution, and by the time the door shuts behind them, all will be out of date. The boundary between humans and prehumans is necessarily fuzzy. Some paleoanthropologists think that as soon as we see apes that could walk upright we should start speaking of humans. Judging from the fossilized remains of hip and toe bones, some East African apes began doing this 6 or 7 million years ago. Most experts, though, think this sets the bar too low, and standard biological classifications in fact define the genus *Homo* (mankind in Latin) by bundling together an increase in brain size from 400,500 cubic centimeters to roughly 630 (our own brains are typically about twice as big) with the first evidence for upright apes smashing stones together to create crude tools. Both processes began among bipedal East African apes around 2.5 million years ago. Louis and Mary Leakey, the famous e...

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ambition and erudition' -- Paul Kennedy, Sunday Times`Morris handles huge ideas and transglobal theories with a breathtaking ease and humour.' --Artemis Cooper, Evening Standard`A path-breaking work that lays out what modern history should look like.' --Financial Times