

Civilization: The West and the Rest Study Guide

Civilization: The West and the Rest by Niall Ferguson

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Contents

Civilization: The West and the Rest Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Introduction, Rassela's Question.....	4
Chapter 1, Competition (Two Rivers, The Eunuch and the Unicorn, The Spice Race, The Mediocre Kingdom).....	6
Chapter 2, Science (The Siege, Micrographia, Osman and Fritz, Tanzimat Tours, From Istanbul to Jerusalem).....	8
Chapter 3, Property (New Worlds, Land of the Free, American Revolutions, The Fate of the Gullahs).....	11
Chapter 4, Medicine.....	13
Chapter 5, Consumption.....	15
Chapter 6, Work (Work Ethics and Word Ethics, Get your Kicks, The Chinese Jerusalem, Lands of Unbelief, The End of Days?).....	17
Conclusion, The Rivals.....	19
Important People.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	27
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	31



Plot Summary

In "Civilization: The West and the Rest", popular and controversial historian Niall Ferguson sets out to explain why Western civilization, roughly understood as the set of peoples and nations that live in the earth's northern hemisphere, reaching from the U.S. through Europe, has so far exceeded the accomplishments of other civilizations in world history and in the world at present. Ferguson's thesis is that the West's dominance is due to its use of six "killer apps" or scientific, intellectual and cultural tools to increase its power, knowledge, dominance and influence. The book is divided into an introduction and conclusion, which contain six large chapters, one covering each of the "killer apps."

The first of Ferguson's killer apps is "competition." In many civilizations, a single ruling class dominated a great, enormous landmass. As a result, the political body was not competitive with others. There was for all intents and purposes an economic and political monopoly in place. The West was different for a number of reasons, but these differences manifested itself in many small nations that could compete with one another for wealth and influence, along with groups within nations competing with each other for the same. The second killer app is Western science. Because the West exceeded in scientific knowledge, basically creating modern science, it was able to gain military and economic dominance over many parts of the world.

The third killer app is private property and the rule of law and representative government. In general, we might call this app "liberal democracy" which gave the West governments that were broadly responsive to the needs and interests of citizens and protected their property so that individuals and groups could use what they earned or bought to create jobs and wealth. The fourth killer app is modern medicine, which followed scientific exploration. Modern medicine significantly extended lifespans and cured a great many diseases, allowing the West to further expand its populations and wealth.

The fifth killer app is consumption, as Ferguson celebrates the West making peace, despite its Christian origins, with purchasing and using enormous quantities of consumption goods. As a result, Western wealth grew and other nations and civilizations had to start consuming Western products due to their dominance. The final killer app is "work" which refers to the work ethic that grew out of Protestant Christianity. Because the West was willing to work hard, it was especially productive and powerful.

The conclusion of the book focuses on the West's rivals, in the form of Islamic civilization and much more importantly Chinese civilization. But Ferguson concludes that the real danger to the West is a loss of confidence in itself. Unless the West is willing to celebrate its killer apps, it will likely face gradual decline as it will not be able to adapt to forthcoming challenges, like the financial crisis that began in 2007.



Introduction, Rassela's Question

Author Niall Ferguson opens his book by noting that Kenneth Clark, the creator of a television series on human civilization that inspired Ferguson as a child, helped to define the idea of civilization for a generation. Civilization was correlated with high visual culture, that is great art and architecture. In the book, Ferguson takes a broader, more comparative view of civilization, including information about both sewage pipes and flying buttresses. A civilization is measured by the range of its achievements, especially its ability to produce a high duration and quality of life for its citizens. Civilizations are also the largest unit of coherent human social organization, broader than empires and nations.

What was the most advanced civilization in the 15th century, for instance? Had one traveled the world, she would be most impressed by the Oriental civilizations and the Near East Ottomans. Western Europe was a miserable backwater, just recuperating from the Black Death. Most of the great kingdoms were in a state of internal conflict and Muslims still ruled swaths of Spain. The most prosperous areas were the North Italian city-states: Florence, Genoa, Pisa, Siena and Venice. 15th century North America was basically an anarchic wilderness compared to the great Aztecs, Mayas and Incas in Central and South America. An observer would have no reason to think that a great civilization would arise out of Europe and North America. And yet it happened. Starting in the late fifteenth century, Western Europe would explore by starting with a religion based on the acts of a Middle East Jew and science borrowed from the great Oriental empires. This civilization would conquer the world and convert many of them to a Western way of life more by the word than the sword.

Ferguson thinks cultural and civilization relativism is absurd. Instead, the West is humanity's greatest civilization. It has the best health, length of life, art, architecture, science and military power. Other nations have only grown to the West's level of development by copying some of its institutions. The debates over civilizational structure today are defined by the Western economic ideas of Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes with a few holdouts for Karl Marx - all Western thinkers. There is no real debate about how to run non-economic institutions. Universities, medicine, pharmacology, marketing, clothing, housing, working, holidays, missionaries and atheism across the world are either Western or adaptations based on Western ideas.

The challenge for Ferguson is to figure out how it happened. Some say imperialism, but this is silly as other imperial powers did not flourish. The Ottoman Empire and the great Chinese dynasties did not become dominant. Neither was luck the cause, but rather knowledge. And yet Western knowledge was limited with respect to the rest of the world at the turn of the 15th century. Culture is also not terribly helpful, as the eastern and western ends of Eurasia in the 1500s were not so different. Part of the story may be Jared Diamond's suggestion that decentralized European city-states produced civilization-generating competition along all the right dimensions, whereas elsewhere homogeneous Oriental empires held back development. But that political fragmentation is also unstable in lots of ways.



Ferguson's thesis is that the West discovered six "killer apps" or novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas: Competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society and the work ethics. Competition is the decentralization of political and economic life, creating nations-states and capitalism. Science is a way of studying the world that gave the West military advantage. Property rights gave rise to the rule of law and helped form the stable basis for representative government. Medicine produced increase in health and life expectancy, whereas the consumer society, lives filled with consumption goods, played a role in sustaining the industrial revolution, and the work ethic, a moral framework derived from Protestant Christianity that created a "glue" holding society together despite the threats and instabilities produced by the first five options. The real difference between the West and the Rest is institutional, and not just due to Western success but to Eastern failure.

For Ferguson, "The West" is a set of norms, behaviors and institutions with borders that are blurred but are roughly based in the intersection of the Northern and Western Hemispheres of the Earth. But the West is also not unified, which is one of its distinguishing characteristics. And we should note that Western civilization has risen and fallen once before, through the Greek and Roman Empires (Western Civilization 1.0). Ferguson thinks that Western Civilization 2.0 is in risk of decline due to shrinking populations and slowly growing economies and the Protestant ethic is falling apart. Western civilization has lots confidence in itself.



Chapter 1, Competition (Two Rivers, The Eunuch and the Unicorn, The Spice Race, The Mediocre Kingdom)

Why did China fall behind while Europe moved ahead in the 18th century? Adam Smith thought that the Chinese did not encourage foreign commerce, whereas others blamed tyranny and even Confucianism. And yet in the 15th century a trip along two rivers, the Thames and the Yangzi, would have given you a different picture. The Yangzi was coated with development and great populations, along with a Grand Canal. Nanjing, on the Yangzi, was the largest city in the world in 1420, with between half a million and a million people. The Forbidden City, Beijing, was finished in 1420, making Ming China the greatest civilization in the world.

The life along the Thames was a backwater. Even the Tower of London would have seemed crude in comparison to Beijing. London was a fraction of the size of Beijing and was a much less pleasant place to live. The two sewage systems were completely different and violence was very common in the West, as war with France was almost permanent, and fighting with the Welsh, Scots and Irish was also common. Ferguson goes on at length to contrast the two rivers.

In the next section, Ferguson asks how we can understand the pre-eminence of the East. First, Asian agriculture was much more productive and the East avoided the bubonic plague. China had already invented bell towers, astronomical charts, the printing press, paper money, wall paper and the seed drill. The first blast furnace was built in China in 200 B.C. and the Chinese built the first iron suspension bridge somewhere around AD 65. It had also invented the spinning wheel, the silk reeling frame, gunpower, sea and lane minds, rockets, the fishing reel, chemical insecticide, the compass, playing cards, the toothbrush and the wheelbarrow. Zheng He was the first great ocean explorer, a good fifty years before Vasco de Gama. All four of de Gama's vessels could have fit inside He's big treasure ship.

Vasco de Gama went in search of the spices cinnamon, cloves, mace and nutmeg that the Europeans could not grow. This created the economic incentive to find routes to find the spices as cheaply as possible. And the Age of Exploration began as a result, generating competition among different nations and sea companies. Zheng He had sailed for the glory of the dynasty, but the Western explorers sailed for their own economic and political gain. This created a "spice race" like the 20th century space race. Da Gama set sail in 1497 and like many others, left trading posts in his wake (Zheng He did not). The Portuguese were eager to trade, unlike the Chinese, and even set up European trading posts in China. Spain would follow Portugal, seizing the initiative in the New World. The Dutch would follow soon after, along with the French.

But what about the English? They joined quickly by the mid 16th century in force. The world began to be carved up by all of these powers. But why did the Europeans have



more commercial fervor? The answer is that there were hundreds of competing states, from Venice to the Baltic Sea. The simplest answer is geography, as Europe had many mountains and rivers, while China had three major rivers, the Yellow, the Yangzi and the Pearl. Conflict could be devastating in Europe but fighting improved military technology. The states also got better at raising revenues for their campaigns, allowing states to strengthen. And the English and Dutch East India Companies were the first modern corporations. Further, no European monarch ever became powerful enough to stop overseas exploration unlike the Turks or the Chinese. The fights also created havens for religious toleration, such as Amsterdam. And religious intensity also led to more exploration. Political fragmentation led Europeans to seek all sorts of new opportunities. And their own nobility even sometimes hemmed in the kings. Even in the 12th century, Henry I of England allowed the inhabitants of London to choose their own sheriff and justice. The city would from there compete with the Crown for power. So, there was even competition within states and within cities.

East Asia was a vast monochrome blanket, with one major competitor - the Mongols. The Chinese produced the Forbidden City, the Great Wall and grand Confucian bureaucracies. The Ming Dynasty began in 1368 and created a great civilization. But political factionalism increased well into the seventeenth century and created a great collapse that devastated the Chinese, reducing the Chinese population by 35 to 40%. Turning inwards was fatal, as the civilization was impressive outwardly but fragile because it was based on a static social order, creating a social trap. But England's population accelerated, as production propelled it out of a Malthusian trap. Colonization allowed surplus population to emigrate, raising productivity, incomes, nutrition and height. The Japanese took precisely the opposite path, to their great detriment. Little England pulled ahead of the great Orient due to commerce and colonization. China fell into a stationary state, as few recognizing, though among them Adam Smith. But while the Europeans could admire the Chinese, the favor was not returned. The ascendancy of the West was clear in 1842, when English gunboats sailed up the Yangzi to retaliate for the destruction of their opium stocks, forcing China to pay a great penalty, open five ports to British trade and give up the island of Hong Kong.

They are, however, building ships again in China and trading with the world. Zheng He is now a famous hero. But they are still behind the English, with the average Chinese citizen nine times poorer than the average Englishman. These are the results of competition vs political monopoly.



Chapter 2, Science (The Siege, Micrographia, Osman and Fritz, Tanzimat Tours, From Istanbul to Jerusalem)

Since the inception of Islam, Christians and Muslims have fought, but over the last 300 years, the Christians have almost always won. Why? Ferguson thinks this is due to the superiority of Western science, an advantage the West did not always have. In the 9th through the 11th century, Muslims made most of the great scientific gains and Muslim mathematics built on Greek and Indian foundations. The first truly experimental scientist was Ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi in the 9th century. Muslims also produced the first algebra textbook. Even Roger Bacon admitted that philosophy was drawn from the Muslims. So given this, how did the Muslim world fall behind? And how did science all the West to take over the world?

In 1683, the Ottoman army was at the gates of Vienna, as it had been in 1529. An Anatolian dynasty was built out of the ruins of the Byzantine Empire and the Ottomans were the standard bearers of Islam. Their leader in part of the 16th century was Suleiman the Magnificent. And even in the late 16th century, the contrast between the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg empire and the Ottoman empire was striking. In the seventeenth century, the Ottomans conquered Crete and much of the Ukraine. On July 13th, 1683, 60,000 Ottoman Janissaries and 80,000 Balkan auxiliaries reached Vienna's gates. The general, Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa Koprulu or "Kara" threatened the people either to convert to Islam or to surrender political power to the Sultan or die or flee. The Turks were even prepared to starve the Viennese until they surrendered. But their encampment gradually ran short of supplies giving Holy Roman Emperor Leopold time to recruit additional forces. The extra forces ended the siege. This failure was the beginning of the end. After that the Ottomans would be driven from nearly all European lands conquered by Suleiman.

This was also a pivotal moment in the rise of the West. At the time, the two sides were evenly matched with respect to their military technology. But in 1687, Isaac Newton published his "Principia". and three years later Locke published his famous Second Treatise. The West and East would from then on be differentiated by the widely differing extent to which they came upon and used new knowledge.

The path Europe took towards the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment was long and difficult. Its origins came in the Christian idea that the Church and state should be separate, in contrast to the Muslim insistence that the two always be united. In 1500, Europe had rediscovered much of classical learning thanks to contact with the Muslims. Polyphony was born in the 12th century and Bacon helped to establish the experimental method. But the more decisive breakthrough than the Renaissance was the Reformation and the breaking apart of Western Christianity that began in 1517 in large part due to the printing press. Gutenberg's press was more flexible and scalable than what was developed in China. The technology was too powerful to monopolize. Martin



Luther benefited most from this development whose tracks Johann Gutenberg helped him distribute across Germany, tracts critical of the Catholic Church. Luther spread the ideas that people were saved by faith alone apart from works and that all believers were priests. Jan Hus's earlier related views were snuffed out by the Pope without the printing press. Between 1521 and 1545, Luther alone wrote half of all pro-Reformation works. Because Luther emphasized the individual reading of scripture and mutual teaching, the new medium was the message of the Reformation.

The New Testament was printed in English in 1526 permitting literate laymen to read the bible. Religious conservatives denounced the printing press and Catholic leaders like Thomas More realized the only way to respond was to join the battle in print. To stop Calvin's Geneva Bible, King James commissioned an alternative "authorized" version. The teachings of Aristotle also benefited from the press. Luther was happy for the Koran to be published because he thought acquaintance with it would insulate people from Muslim conversions. And science would gain too, such as Robert Hooke's "Micrographia", a work of scientific empiricism published in 1665. Hooke also invented the microscope. When Newton and Leibniz created the calculus, it helped math and science to surge ahead, along with the philosophical revolutions brought about by Descartes and Spinoza. These events gave rise to anatomy, astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, math, mechanics and physics.

The problem for those who decry Eurocentrism have a problem because the Scientific Revolution was completely Eurocentric. Ottoman progress was almost non-existent. Muslims often saw science as a dangerous temptation to heresy. The study of philosophy and science was limited and persecuted. Even printing was resisted. Rulers in Europe in the 18th century all promoted science and created centers to study science along with academies, most prominently that Royal Society in England. It created a new scientific community. They were encouraged to publish new scientific work, allowing the community to build on its past. When Newton died, he was celebrated among all social classes.

Ferguson next draws a contrast between Istanbul's Sultan Osman III and Potsdam's Frederick the Great. The latter created reforms that made Prussia the byword for military efficiency and administrative rationality. The Ottomans stagnated, however, and had to deal with structural problems like financial crises. Corruption was rife. The decline of administrative standards can be traced from the mid-15th century down to the present day. The worst problem was the decline of Sultan quality. Frederick William's realm, by contrast, was extraordinarily well run. He was also passionate about military power, which we can trace to his early works of political philosophy. He also put his father's treasure to work, creating an opera and a cathedral. He created complete religious toleration, freedom of the press and free immigration. And Prussia experienced a cultural boom. Under his rule Kant produced the Critique of Pure Reason. He also was one of the first members of the Enlightenment and the political leader who did more than anyone to bring it to prominence. Enlightenment thinkers focused especially on social science and pit reason against "superstitions" and Christianity. Adam Smith's analysis of the institutions of civil society in The Wealth of Nations and The Theory of



Moral Sentiments was especially important. The French sought to create a complete democracy. And all these scientists had great patrons.

But Frederick continued to expand his military power and became a core part of Prussian society. 3% of the population was a member of the army, more than double that in France and Austria. The army focused on drill and discipline. They also used the first artillery, including the first Howitzers. These tools would become a European standard. Benjamin Robins was responsible for applying physics to artillery to create the musket ball. Fortifications and infantry became much less powerful as a result. Leonard Euler, a mathematician himself, improved upon it. In 1807, the Turks were still using cannons.

By the eighteenth century, the Ottomans knew they had to learn from the West. Some said that the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment must be embraced. But Ottoman rulers retained a superiority complex that left them less open. Political opposition to change was strong. But the Muslim world opened up only soon enough to be 200 years behind. But Ottoman administration did not improve. One of the greatest reformers was Mustafa Kemal, who renamed himself Ataturk, the leader of a new Turkish republic following World War I, who radically reformed many of Turkey's institutions. The First World War had destroyed the Ottoman Empire and opened the Muslim world to Science and Enlightenment. Israel has, despite enormous opposition from its Muslim neighbors, is now on the cutting edge of innovation, with over twenty times the number of patents to its name than all Arab countries combined. But Ferguson notes that the scientific gap is finally closing up. Today's question is whether the West can maintain its lead.



Chapter 3, Property (New Worlds, Land of the Free, American Revolutions, The Fate of the Gullahs)

The "New World" would be the West's world. Europeans would take over the entire Western hemisphere, but most of all the Spanish and British empires, who went looking for gold and treasure and religious freedom. The colonization created a natural experiment where two Western cultures would be exported to a wide range of new peoples, the English in the North and the Spanish in the south, and see how they functioned. The real difference between the two civilizations, in Ferguson's mind, was the sanctity of individual freedom and the security of private property rights that allowed the English to get ahead.

The two differences are symbolized by two ships. The first landed in northern Ecuador in 1532, with its members seeking to conquer and send the fruits of conquest to enrich themselves and the King of Spain. The second, the Carolina, landed in South Carolina in 1670, whose people had the modest ambition to find a better life than they had in England. The North American dream became one of real estate plus representation. And indeed the Spanish conquered, though not only through arms, but disease as well. The conquistadors sought gold above all else and set up governments to rule great cities as a tiny, wealthy, Spanish-born elite.

But in 1670, the English in Carolina were very different. The arrivals were indentured servants, who financed their travel expenses by serving temporary masters. It is not so clear what made the two civilizations different. Ferguson speculates as to the main causes. Were they cultural? Or were they geographical and based on different distributions of people and natural resources? And yet British colonization had better results than Spanish or Portuguese colonies wherever they took hold. Arizona is richer than Mexico, and Hong Kong is richer than Manila. The British brought with them the idea of individual private property rights generated by their common law courts gradually since the twelfth century, along with militant Protestantism and that taxation was only legitimacy based on parliamentary representation. The parliamentary ideas arose from the clash of ideas between the followers of Hobbes, who believed the path to peace was through absolute monarchy, and the followers of John Locke who believed in natural property rights that could restrain the king and in democratic government.

The two civilizations also parceled out land on different grounds. The English had to work the soil for themselves. The Spanish distributed property through favoritism. North American would be a property-owners' democracy and would allow great social mobility. The Spanish also brought Roman Catholicism, an effective religious monopoly, and so little competition of religious ideas took place. And in 1776, the English Americans threw off their monarchical rulers and set up a somewhat democratic government via the leadership of George Washington. But the South American liberator, Simon Bolivar, did not create a democracy, though he tried with friends in Venezuela in 1811, and then



tried again a few years later, and again years after that. Ferguson thinks he failed because the South Americans had no experience in democratic decision-making because power had for so long been concentrated in the hands of Spanish elites. Bolivar instead created a dictatorship and centralized authority because he believed that his "fellow citizens" could not yet exercise rights for themselves. Another problem came from the unequal distribution of property, and a third from the degree of racial heterogeneity and division. The English north had far more immigrants and far fewer natives. The populations in South America did not mix well and, as Bolivar predicted, these factors would make South American states unstable and undemocratic. Thus began the Latin American cycle of coup and counter-coup. And so in modern day Venezuela, there have been twenty-six constitutions, while in the modern day US there has been only one.

Of course, we must remember that the racial divisions in North America were not small, as the differences between whites and blacks hardened over time. Slave owners led the most successful revolution in history, the American Revolution, when slave liberation was underway in Europe. Eight million slaves crossed the Atlantic between 1450 and 1820 when the slave trade was abolished. And the lot of slaves in Latin America was much better than in North America. The former could secure manumission, for one thing. But because slaves were regarded a bit more equally, they were punished more brutally. North Americans regarded their slaves as sub-human animals. And in the North there was a taboo against race-mixing that did not exist to anywhere near the extent in Latin America. One reason for the difference was that English emigrants took their wives with them, while Spanish emigrants often did not. In Latin American, blacks fell into a racial melting pot, but in the North they were treated separately. And while slavery ended peacefully in most of Latin American, it could only end in violence in the US. And racism continued brutally for a full century afterwards with a legacy to this day.

Ferguson ends the chapter by noting that English colonies in Africa did not have the same positive trajectory, including the ending of rank injustice. These matters are left to other chapters.



Chapter 4, Medicine

From the middle of the nineteenth century and a hundred years thereafter, the West actually ruled much of the Rest, as it was the age of imperialism driven by many motives, some altruistic, but most not. The British Empire was by far the largest. In 1913, eleven motherlands covering 10% of the land's surface governed more than half of the world. And this imperialism was heavily critiqued even in its day. But it is increasingly difficult to blame the poor fate of the "bottom billion," the poorest people in the world, on colonial exploitation. Part of the problem is poor institutions, causing even foreign aid to fail time and time again.

Modern medicine is what has really made the biggest difference across the world and between developed and undeveloped nations. Life expectancy at birth in 1800 was 28.5 years, and two centuries later it was 66.6 years. By the First World War, typhoid and cholera had been eliminated and diphtheria and tetanus were controlled by vaccine. The health transition began in the West in the 19th century, and in Asian countries in the first half of the 20th. Life expectancy began to improve in much of the world before imperial withdrawal.

Many empires justify their imperial ventures in the name of civilizing backward nations. The French were perhaps the most fond of the idea. Ferguson attributes this mindset to the nature of the French Revolution and the writings of its key philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose book *The Social Contract* was among the most dangerous books in the history of Western Civilization, as it postulated that the people have a "general will" that only elites can figure out how to express politically. This led to leaders claiming that they speak for society. France became an authoritarian society because its state was too centralized, it elevated the general will over the rule of law allowed attacks on religion, gave too much power to intellectuals and places equality over liberty. French Jacobins created a totalitarian revolution that other European powers tried to repress.

And when Napoleon stepped into the mix, he found no social institutions to resist him and so he was able to conscript millions. After this wars, two million lots their lives and nearly half were French. But Napoleon had ambitious policy aims, to enlarge France's borders, shrink Prussia, create a Swiss confederation and a German confederation, along with a new kingdom in North Italy. Napoleon transformed Europe into a system of nation states, undermining the medieval-era privileges of many local lords and princes. When Napoleon was finally defeated, France was in debt and the monarchy was restored, leaving the French to try revolution again twice over the next century. French imperialism took on this character, as permanent revolution. Ferguson then proceeds to discuss how French ideas and the abolition of slavery interacted. In their attempts to raise up colonized people to a more equal status, that is to civilize them, they were threatened by disease which threatened to make much of sub-Saharan Africa uninhabitable. Africa became the testing ground for the power of modern medicine.

European colonialists in Africa were always in dangerous of disease. This produced a generation of European medical innovators, such as Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch.



Railway innovation also helped people expand into the African core. Overthrowing native power structures came just before attempts by missionaries to end native superstition. And despite worries about French arrogance, Ferguson argues that the French brought great, measurable progress, such as smallpox vaccinations starting in the beginning of the 20th century and the draining of swamps killed the mosquitos that spread malaria. However, the same new medical science that helped Africans was also used to justify European racial supremacy, separating Africans from their colonizers despite the French belief in universal citizenship.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Germany was the leader of Western Civilization and it also produced the pseudo-science of social Darwinism, pushed forward by misinterpretations of the work of Charles Darwin. A century ago almost no one in the West doubted whites were better than blacks. Ferguson reviews some of their dark deeds, coming long before the Nazis. The theory of racial superiority, however, would wreak havoc on Europe when it was turned inward.

World War I was the war of Western civilizations, showing that the West contained within it the seeds of its own destruction, using its "killer apps" against itself, including industrialization and modern medicine. Ferguson reviews familiar details of the war, focusing on France's efforts, particularly in Africa. Europeans had claimed to civilize Africa, but even the French failed, despite their efforts, to implant Western civilization. The legacy of Europe's World War I in Africa was devastating. And yet France's rule did seem to improve life in its colonies in Senegal, Algeria and Tunisia. Better medical care explains the exploding populations in these areas. And perhaps the initially most powerful empire, Nazi Germany, was the worst and weakest of all. And in some ways it was the last incarnation of a terrible idea, empire, which was obsolete in 1945. The road to riches was not the exploitation of foreigners. And yet somehow in the ashes of imperialism a new civilizational model, economic consumption, would grow and better much better for people.



Chapter 5, Consumption

The next of Ferguson's killer apps is consumption. Consumption has driven Western civilization forward by driving economic development. The textile industry led the way and it has had the odd effect of giving people across the world more choice while making them look more and more alike. The textile revolution began in England in the early 19th century and via new innovations, such as better iron production and steam power, allowed the economy to specialize in producing a lot of different products, though cotton was always the king of the development of the British economy. Why did the industrial revolution begin there? First, labor was scarce, which generated high wages. Second, Britain had a great deal of coal.

The British Industrial Revolution, in contrast to the French Revolution before it, spread across Europe peacefully, as innovators could not protect their intellectual property from imitating. So by the late 19th century, industrialization extended westward from England throughout the United States and eastward all the way to Moscow.

Of course, famously the Industrial Revolution had many critics, Karl Marx the first among them. He was an "odious" person who argued that the industrial economy would produce an increasingly unequal society that would undermine itself. Ferguson grants that the Industrial Revolution increased inequality but notes that industrialization did not impoverish workers but created and diversified the middle class. And industrial workers often did not care for Marx's recommendations, such as the abolition of private property. The Marxists were also mistaken about whether the nation-state could adapt to these economic changes, as it did by creating nationalism, which held together an increasingly unequal set of nations. This led to the consolidation of Germany and Italy in particular.

The process of industrialization united the world such that in 1910 the world was more economically integrated than at any time in the past via railway, steamship and telegraph. The West shrank the world. Labor flowed across borders as well and Western styles of dress took hold, even in previously isolated Japan. No other Asian nation embraced Western ways of life like the Japanese.

The First World War shattered much of this unity, as it ended four dynasties and shattered their empire. American President Woodrow Wilson sought to recast the war as a crusade for democracy, whereas new Russian leader Vladimir Lenin had a different view, creating the USSR based on communism, basing his argument on the successful military-run states during World War I. From the German Marx's mind, to Lenin's to much of the world, communism was another western export. And National Socialism and fascism rose as well, though it may have died if not for World War II and the Great Depression. Capitalism seemed to be a failure, though some more moderate intellectuals, like John Maynard Keynes, argued that it merely needed to be properly managed by government. Nonetheless, the authoritarians had their way in Germany and the USSR and the nations they conquered.



In some ways, World War II was a war between four types of Western civilization: National Socialism, Soviet communism, European imperialism and American capitalism. The war eventually enveloped all of these views in a conflict. American capitalism lurched forward through the creation of the atomic bomb which Ferguson controversially argues had the effect of lessening the amount of killing and ending the war.

After World War II came the Cold War. Ferguson speculates that had the Cold War turned hot, the Soviets could have won. But instead the war was more about butter than guns, and in that department the U.S. decisively won. Consumer society after WWII lifted all boats in the US, gradually decreasing the allure of the USSR. The East Asian economic miracle was part of the key to winning the cold war, as those nations that emulated the US grew quickly as did the US-led new global economic order. The creation of mass consumerism and reconciling it with radical individualism was one of Western Civilization's greatest tricks. The symbol of mass consumerism that spread across the world was jeans. Jeans represented the relaxed, free, cheap and easy lifestyle of the West. Youth began to rebel against authoritarian control in the late sixties, especially clear in the worldwide revolts of 1968. And gradually many of the states protested against began to liberalize. The USSR had anemic growth and its factor productivity was actually declining. The new revolutions of 1989 spread quickly until the Berlin Wall fell and soon thereafter the USSR itself in part through the charismatic leadership of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II. Chinese communism would not fall apart but it would gradually liberalization, growing quickly as it became more economically free.

And yet mass consumerism, the West's great weapon, has been itself the subject of searing critique. Ferguson thinks the result has been a loss of confidence of Westerners in their very own civilization.



Chapter 6, Work (Work Ethics and Word Ethics, Get your Kicks, The Chinese Jerusalem, Lands of Unbelief, The End of Days?)

Ferguson begins Chapter 6 by reviewing briefly the rise of the West and its associated institutions and how the rest of the world copies them. But a question has been raised as to whether the West will remain a great civilization or whether it is moving into a period of decline. A number of factors that brought down the Roman Empire are present today, especially economic troubles and new competitors. But the Roman Empire, Gibbon argued at least, was brought down by Christianity, whereas the West thrived because of it, especially due to its Protestant variant, promoting the ethic of hard work and thrift.

It was 19th century and early 20th century German sociologist Max Weber who first argued that the "Protestant work ethic" drove the growth of capitalism in the West. His view to the US to see the world's fair in St. Louis in 1904 drove him to figure out why there was so much intellectual dynamism in the United States. Through Protestantism the natural Christian asceticism was driven into market relations. While Weber's views had some serious problems, he was still on to something, for one thing Protestant missionaries did is to spread literacy. They also did not promote restraints on advances, like Chinese Confucianism or many strains of Islam.

And yet today Europeans work much less than Americans and Asians do. Extended education and early retirement have shrunk the work base. Europeans also work fewer hours. The fall in work hours is correlated with a fall in religiosity. Ferguson is especially impressed with the collapse of British Christianity, which has been rapid since the end of World War II. So what killed Christianity in Europe? There are many theories but these theories cannot explain why the U.S. remains relatively Christian. And oddly cultural change occurred in the U.S. alongside a rise in evangelical Protestantism. Ferguson believes that the cause is the diversity of religious denominations in the US, with their fierce competition for members. The Reformation created national, government churches in Europe but a market-based set of religions in the U.S. Further, the most successful denominations are those who have adapted to American consumerism. And yet Protestantism, which was supposed to motivate a high savings rather, no longer does so in the US.

In China, surprisingly, there may be today more practicing Christians than in Europe. Churches are built there faster than anywhere else in the world. It is a bit odd that Protestantism never took root there despite all the efforts though a loosely Christianity-based rebellion, the Taiping Rebellion, which cost millions of lives, seems to have slowed Christian growth in China for several decades into the late 19th century. But today things have changed. Ferguson reviews the history a bit. The Chinese Jerusalem,



a heavily religious and work-based city known as Wenzhou symbolizes this Christianizing element in Chinese culture. Today some Chinese leaders will recognize Christianity as one of the West's greatest sources of power and strength.

The real worry about lost Christianity in Europe is not so much unbelief but the replacement of Christianity with other, more vague and unsatisfying, forms of new-age spirituality and materialism. Plus, Europe is in danger of being partly replaced by Muslim immigrants. Similar forces were key in the decline of the Roman Empire. China is narrowing the economic gap with the US and Europe and global warming could strain global access to various goods. So an environmental disaster might undermine our civilization as well. But worries about environmental calamity are partly driven by a common religious need to see the "end of days" as close by. So many in the West believe we are doomed and this may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.



Conclusion, The Rivals

A great many writers across Western history have been attracted to the idea that civilizations rise and fall in a clear, cyclical pattern. Marx and Hegel tried to explain these cycles in terms of underlying factors. For Marx, it was due to economic patterns, whereas for Hegel it was due to ideas. But cyclical theories persist to this day, such as Jared Diamond's grand theory of rise and fall which bases civilizational patterns on their use of natural resources.

For Ferguson, civilizations are very complex organizations that totter between order and disorder. They can appear in long-term equilibria when in fact they're unstable and constantly adapting. Human intelligence as expressed in civilizations is a spontaneous order with emergent properties that are hard to understand.

Interestingly, the first great Western civilization, the Roman Empire, declined and fell in a single generation after existing for a thousand years. The Incas also collapsed in a generation following their encounter with the Spanish. The most recent civilizations collapse was the fall of the Soviet Union.

Ferguson ends the book by asking whether the West is vulnerable to collapse. The West beat the rest view competition, science, the rule of law and representative government, modern medicine, consumerism and the work ethic. The Rest is catching up to the extent that they're "downloading" these apps. So the West is not so much declining but declining relative to other nations and civilizations. The financial crisis that began in 2007 has accelerated this relative decline. Many civilizations are brought down by financial crises, just as they are brought down by war. Spain's decline was financial, as was the Habsburg decline. To respond to the crisis, the West has run up massive fiscal deficits and are continuing to expand underfunded liabilities in the form of social insurance for the poor and elderly. These challenges may force the US to retreat from the world.

Ferguson does not agree with Samuel Huntington that the world is moving towards a clash of civilizations. There is no real civilizational war since the end of the Cold War. Instead, the wars are fought within civilizations. The only real threat is China, whose more or less quiet rise will likely continue as they consume, import, invest abroad and innovate at faster and faster rates. However, the Chinese could easily stumble due to a lack of truly competitive economic enterprises, much like Japan's stagnation. China could also succumb to political unrest as it has so often in the past. Further, the rising Chinese middle class could demand a greater share of political power. Finally, China may antagonize its neighbors, leading them into a military coalition with the U.S.

Still, the Western model has proven successful for a reason, and any society that wants to catch up will have to mimic it in many ways. The question is whether the West can recognize the superiority of its killer apps. The biggest threat to Western civilization is not Islamic or Chinese civilization, but our own lack of confidence in ourselves.



Important People

The West

Niall Ferguson's aim in "Civilization: The West and the Rest" is to explain why Western civilization presently dominates the rest of the world in a variety of ways - scientifically, militarily, culturally and ideologically. While "the West" may seem like an odd choice for a main character, "The West" is arguably the protagonist or flawed hero of the book. "The West" consists of those nations and peoples that originate in Europe over the last thousands years or so and that have spread throughout North America. In other words, today "the West" is the sum of Canada, the US, Europe and their colonies.

Ferguson argues that the West is dominant due to its harnessing of six "killer apps" or sociological, economic and philosophical resources that allowed it to get ahead. While "the West" was poor and culturally backward since the fall of the Roman Empire, its stumbling upon these apps allowed it to gradually forge ahead, with particular successes in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

These killer apps are competition, science, property, modern medicine, consumption and the work ethic. Competition among western nations and groups within nations drove Western progress and science allowed the West to figure out how to progress. Property rights and representative government created a stable set of economic institutions that allowed the West to build on its gains, whereas modern medicine allowed the west to extend lifetimes and make work more productive. Because the West was prepared to consume a wide variety of goods, there was a market for its products and due to its work ethic, the West had the energy to meet that demand.

The Rest

"The Rest" is a character entirely of Ferguson's imagination because it is a conjunction of all non-Western nations. Ferguson is thinking in particular of African and South American nations, along with Islamic, Indian and Asian civilizations. The problem with "the Rest" is that they failed either to discover or utilize the same killer apps that allowed the West to get ahead. Ferguson picks on Islamic and Chinese civilization in particular for failing to do more with their opportunities. For instance, Islamic nations and empires let their religious commitments stand in the way of scientific progress. Sultans banned the use of the printing press, as an example. Further, they also resisted the institutionalization of democratic, representative government, which meant that a great portion of economic growth was diverted to the ruling classes. And since they were hostile to science, the Islamic world was slow to benefit from modern medicine.

The other big case of the failures of "the Rest" is Chinese civilization. The problem with China was that while it once had a powerful scientific culture and invented a great many useful tools, it was not able to build on those achievements due to institutional factors.



First, its geography led it to be ruled by very large territorial entities, such that there was little institutional competition. So, global Chinese explorers would explore simply on behalf of a Chinese dynasty, whereas Spanish and Portuguese explorers explored for themselves and their much smaller nation-states. Further, the Chinese dynasties, while stable in some ways, were highly vulnerable to changes in population, weather and the like, such that they could quickly collapse and lose the progress won by earlier generations.

England

England gave birth to the industrial revolution and created perhaps the greatest global empire in history.

China

China once contained the greatest global civilization, but it collapsed. However, today the rise of China is a threat to Western dominance.

Spanish Conquistadors

The Spanish explorers and conquerors who brought much of South America under Spanish control but who failed to create sustainable institutions.

English Settlers

The English settlers of North America, by contrast, created enduring institutions that promoted economic growth for all.

The United States

Created by a host of European immigrants, the U.S. is the center of Western civilization today but is threatened by some of its own flaws, such as its present financial crisis.

The Ottomans

The founders of a great Muslim empire that once exceeded European civilization along all the relevant dimensions, but fell behind due to its hostility to democracy and science.

Early Modern Scientists

Early modern European scientists helped the West to forge ahead of other civilizations.

Inventors

Inventors helped to apply the discoveries of early modern scientists to create new goods and services.

Protestants

Protestant Christians helped to establish a work ethic that would make the Western economy productive.

Max Weber

The late 19th century and early 20th century sociologist who tried to explain the dominance of Western civilization.



Objects/Places

The West

Refers roughly to Europe as well as the United States, Canada and Australia, nations that had their origins in Europe.

The United States

The present core of Western civilization in terms of science and culture.

England

The birthplace of the industrial revolution.

Europe

The geographical area where presently dominant Western civilization is located.

China

The home of a once great and perhaps future great civilization.

Western Civilization

The civilization described by Ferguson as presently dominant over all others.

Consumerism

An approach to economic life that sees the purchase of consumer goods as morally permitted and even encouraged. Consumerism is one of the West's killer apps.

The Work Ethic

An ideal where hard work is seen as an ethical requirement. Ferguson claims that this work ethic was rooted in Protestant Christianity and is one of the West's killer apps.



Modern Medicine

Another one of the West's killer apps, modern medicine allowed the West to extend lifespans and cure disease, making life better and workers more productive.

Science

The West did not discover scientific reasoning but it did institutionalize science for the first time, creating another one of its killer apps.

Competition

Due to the smaller political orders in Europe vis-à-vis Chinese and Islamic civilization, European nations competed with one another, which drove their civilizational progress. Competition is another of the West's killer apps.

Property

Under the heading of "property," Ferguson places property rights and representative government, which allowed the West to build on its earlier economic gains and to ensure that governments did not redistribute these gains only to ruling classes. Property was thus another one of the West's killer apps.

Jeans

Jeans are the symbol of the West's global economic and cultural dominance.

Imperialism

The practice of nations systematically conquering and reorganizing other nations for its own benefit. Many European nations pursued imperialism, which in the end did not work to their advantage.

Financial Crises

Collapses and instability in monetary systems that can lead to quick civilizational collapse. The West's financial crisis, which began in 2007, threatens its stability and dominance.



Themes

The Greatness of Western Civilization

Part of the point of "Civilization" is to defend the greatness of Western Civilization against many of those who would criticize it for its errors. Despite the many mistakes that Western nations have made over the last three centuries, they effectively discovered six important resources that have not only benefit citizens of Western nations but that are increasingly benefiting all of humanity.

As indicated elsewhere in the guide, these six "apps" are: competition, science, modern medicine, property, consumerism and the work ethic. Competition arose from the relatively small size of Western nation-states and the more individualistic focus of many of its greatest minds, creating an incentive for nations, explorers, inventors to compete with one another. Science enabled the application of this energy to move ahead and to reinforce itself with new discoveries. Modern medicine was one of the most important fruits of Western science, extending lifespans and curing disease, driving Western economies ahead. Property, that is representative government and property rights, allowed the West to build on and stabilize its economic successes, whereas consumerism created the demand for the goods and services produced by Western economies and the work ethic supplied the energy to produce those goods.

Today other nations and civilizations are competing with the West because they "downloaded" these "killer apps" that were only made possible by the West's discovery of them. So other nations and civilizations was mimic the West or lag behind.

Explaining Western Dominance

Ferguson's book is divided between two groups, the "West" and the "Rest" which roughly divides up Europe, the United States and their satellites over and against the rest of the world. Ferguson's key idea is that the West someone dominates the Rest of the world, in a variety of respects. First, in many cases the West has simply dominated the Rest of the world by conquering it or by using military power to control it in less overt ways. Second, the West controls the rest of the world culturally and ideologically, because other nations have gradually accepted and adopted Western culture and Western ideas. Finally, the West controls the rest of the world in terms of scientific progress. The rest of the world is dependent on the West for new medicine and new technology.

The point of Civilization is to explain Western dominance and as is familiar from elsewhere in the guide, Ferguson tries to explain it by appealing to six unique discoveries made and implemented in the West, discoveries that he calls "killer apps" that the West created and that the rest of the world must "download." Competition allowed the West to dominate because it made faster technological, economic and



military progress due to its competing nation states. Science allowed the West to dominate because science created new military weapons and drew non-Western intellectuals to its universities and thus brought them under its sway.

The Fall of Western Civilization

While Ferguson spends most of his time discussing how the West rose to power over the Rest, he occasionally signals that his book is meant to try to address a problematic lack of confidence that the West has in itself. The West, Ferguson argues, no longer believes that it has the right to dominate the rest of the world even in terms of its moral and political ideals. While Ferguson agrees that imperialism is inappropriate, he worries that moral relativism and ignorance of history has made many in the West unable to appreciate its great accomplishments and to be proud of its present set of institutions. The consequence of this lack of confidence is the threat of the fall of Western civilization. Civilizations, Ferguson claims, can often collapse in on themselves and this due to a lack of self-confidence. The West, in part due to the recent financial crisis, now faces this danger.

While Ferguson does not quite come out and say it, he suggests that his book is meant to help restore the West's confidence in itself. By pointing out the West's great achievements and telling their story, it seems that Ferguson is trying to give his readers (mostly Western) reason to be proud of themselves and their civilization. Due to their discoveries, scientific, medicinal, and institutional, the West should be proud of itself because it has brought the world great goods.



Style

Style

Perspective

Niall Ferguson is known as a popular historian who we might describe as a contrarian and iconoclast. Among his claims to fame are his arguments that the U.K. should not have entered World War I and that the British Empire was a force for good in the world. He is known not so much as a "right-wing" historian but as one who makes claims that often upset conventional wisdom on the left. Perhaps Ferguson's single most prominent identifying feature as a popular historian is his insistence that the West has a great deal to be proud of, in contrast to a large wave of historians that focus on the moral and economic weaknesses of the West.

Civilization fits into Ferguson's general perspective. In it, he claims that a great many in the West have lost moral and philosophical confidence in their civilization, which Ferguson believes is inherently dynamic and morally inspiring and that through its innovations, both scientific and institutional, has brought a great deal of good into the world. This is only evidenced by the fact that Ferguson emphasizes that other civilizations and nations have had to copy the West's institutional structures in order to secure similar gains for themselves.

Another important aspect of Ferguson's perspective is his tendency towards making broad, sweeping claims about major civilizations. He has been criticized on the grounds that good scholarship leads one to hedge such claims.

Tone

The tone of "Civilization" is almost exclusively positive. Ferguson's general tone is upbeat and optimistic. For the most part the book is meant to be not merely an explanation of why Western civilization dominates the others, but a kind of sermon meant to help revive the confidence that citizens of Western nations once had in their civilization. Ferguson repeatedly stresses how innovative, dynamic, fierce, courageous, patient and intelligent many of the West's great minds were and how their institutions became increasingly efficient and just. While he admits that Western civilization has made many mistakes, he recognizes that all civilizations have made mistakes and that we should not lose confidence in ourselves merely because of those errors. Instead, we have reason to be proud of our six "killer apps" that have allowed us to dominate other civilizations, but that have also provided them with the means to forge ahead and compete with us.

So the book acquaints us with plucky stories of great Western leaders and periods of innovation contrasted with sometimes similarly inspiring but flawed actions on behalf of other civilizations, such as the Chinese. And there are times when the tone becomes a



bit darker, such as when Ferguson points out the lack of confidence that the rest presently has in itself or when he describes the major failings of Western and non-Western civilizations. So while the tone of the book is generally positive and upbeat, even plucky, it has occasional, though brief downturns.

Structure

"Civilization" is divided into six chapters sandwiched between an introduction and an epilogue. Each of the chapters is titled for the six "killer apps" that Ferguson identifies as the driving force in the progress of Western civilization and each chapter is subdivided into four or five parts. The introduction is mostly concerned with setting up the idea of a civilization and explaining Ferguson's methodology, while the epilogue is focused on discussing the various challenges that Western civilization faces at present and will face in the near future.

Chapter 1, "Competition" covers the idea of competition as it functioned in the West. Competition largely led nation-states and representatives of small nations states to compete with one another for money, fame and honor, but even less seemly and virtuous competition helped to drive forward Western progress. The chapter is divided into four subheadings, "Two Rivers" covers the differences between Chinese and English civilization, whereas "The Spice Race" explains how Chinese and Spanish and Portuguese explorers differed from one another in their aims such that while Chinese exploration was initially more impressive, Portuguese and Spanish exploration lead to increased trade and wealth. "The Mediocre Kingdom" covers the various aspects of Chinese civilization in the early modern period that had led it to grow but also led to its collapse, leaving Chinese far behind the Western development in the 19th century.

Other chapters are structured much like Chapter 1, with chapter 2 covering science, chapter 3, property, chapter 4, modern medicine, chapter 5 consumption and chapter 6, work.



Quotes

"To my mind, a civilization is much more than just the contents of a few first-rate art galleries. It is a highly complex human organization." (Introduction, 2)

"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." (Introduction, 4)

"In this book I want to show that what distinguished the West from the Rest ... were six identifiably novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas and behaviors... Competition, Science, Property Rights, Medicine, The consumer society, The work ethic." (Introduction, 12)

"By 1420, when the Forbidden City was completed, Ming China had an incontrovertible claim to be the most advanced civilization in the world." (Chapter 1, 22)

"'Conception is sin, birth is pain, life is toil, death is inevitable.' What more succinct description could be devised of life in the Europe of that time?" (Chapter 1, 26)

"For most of the past 300 years, give or take the odd temporary setback, the West has consistently won this clash of civilizations. One of the main reasons for this has been the superiority of Western science. This advantage, however, did not always exist." (Chapter 2, 51)

"Without exaggeration, this cascade of intellectual innovation may be said to have given birth to modern anatomy, astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, geometry, mathematics, mechanics and physics." (Chapter 2, 65)

"Today, then, more than three centuries after the siege of Vienna, the key question is how far the West is still capable of maintaining the scientific lead on which, among many other things, its military superiority has for so long been based." (Chapter 2, 95)

"It was a new world. But it was to be the West's world." (Chapter 3, 96)

"The two ships symbolized this tale of two Americas. On one, conquistadors; on the other indentured servants. One group dreamt of instant plunder.... The others knew that they had years of toil ahead of them." (Chapter 3, 98-9)

"Take the case of the West's more remarkable killer application—the one that, far from being a killer, had the power to double human life expectancy: modern medicine." (Chapter 4, 146)

"So Africa was to be the ultimate testing ground for the fourth killer application of Western civilization: the power of modern medicine to prolong human life." (Chapter 4, 168)



"Western civilization was about to encounter its most dangerous foe: itself." (Chapter 4, 181)

"By 1945, it was time for the West to lay down its arms and pick up its shopping bags - to take off its uniform and put on its blue jeans." (Chapter 4, 195)

"The result is one of the greatest paradoxes of modern history: that an economic system designed to offer infinite choice to the individual has ended up homogenizing humanity." (Chapter 5, 198)

"The West shrank the world." (Chapter 5, 218)

"That mass consumerism, with all the standardization it implied, could somehow be reconciled with rampant individualism was one of the smartest tricks ever pulled by Western civilization." (Chapter 5, 240)

"Yet it was a very specific form of Christianity ... that gave the modern version of Western civilization the sixty of its key advantages over the rest of the world: Protestantism - or, rather, the peculiar ethic of hard work and thrift with which it came to be associated." (Chapter 6, 259)

"The idea that we are doomed - that decline and fall are inevitable, that things can only get worse - is deeply connected with our own sense of mortality." (Chapter 6, 294)

"Those six killer apps were the key to Western ascendancy." (Conclusion, 306)

"Today, as then, the biggest threat to Western civilization is posed not by other civilizations, but by our own pusillanimity - and by the historical ignorance that feeds it." (Conclusion, 325)



Topics for Discussion

What are Ferguson's six "killer apps" for explaining the rise of Western Civilization?

Take one of Ferguson's six "killer apps" and explain how it led to Western dominance.

What does Ferguson mean by "property"? Do you think this is an appropriate description of the "app" he describes?

Do you think that Ferguson provides the reader with good arguments for having some restored confidence in the progress of Western civilization?

What in your opinion is Ferguson's most powerful "app"? Make your case.

What are the biggest threats to contemporary Western civilization on Ferguson's view?

Compare and contrast the Islamic and Chinese competitor civilizations, both past and present, to Western civilization. Why is either a threat? Why haven't they been threats in the past? And which is the greater threat on Ferguson's view?