Civilization: The West and the Rest

Reviewed by Nubia Nieto


Civilization: The West and the Rest is an excellent book analysing the rise of Western dominance over the past five centuries. Ferguson argues that Western civilization developed six killer applications that “the Rest” lacked: 1) competition, 2) science, 3) property rights, 4) medicine, 5) consumer society, and 6) work ethic. Interestingly, Niall Ferguson, who is a professor of history at Harvard University and the London School of Economics, does not emphasize “The triumph of the West” so much as the weakness of the Rest, which, he argues, made it relatively easy for the West to consolidate its power and continue to dominate, even after 500 years.

Ferguson, who is also a Senior Research Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford University and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, takes readers on an extraordinary journey through the history of empires, pointing out significant weaknesses and strengths in some of the most important civilisations around the world – from China to the Muslim World, from the Incas in South America to the Manhattan in New York, and from Namibia in Africa to the National Assembly in France. The author of more than eleven books, dozens of articles and many television documentary series’ such as Empire, American Colossus, The War of the World, The Ascent of Money, and most recently, Civilization, asks the question of whether or not the West has lost its monopoly on these six killer applications, which underpin Western dominance. If so, Ferguson warns, Western ascendancy may be coming to an end.

As one may expect, “the West” is not treated as a geographical expression in the book, so much as a set of norms, behaviours, and institutions with borders that are blurred in the extreme. In this framework, Ferguson identifies the six complex elements mentioned above, all of which involve institutions, ideas, and behaviours that have resulted in Western supremacy.

Ferguson explores each his six “applications” in detail. First of all, he analyses competition in the framework of the Chinese empire. He points out that in the 15th century, China was the most advanced civilisation in the world, while European civilisation was comparatively insignificant. The river Yangzi was a complex waterway that linked Nanjing to Beijing more than 500 miles to the north, while European rivers were comparatively underused. Chinese civilization was also the technological innovation centre, with printing, paper, paper money, wallpaper, toilet paper, chemical insecticide, the fishing reel, matches, the magnetic compass, playing cards, toothbrushes, and many other advances to its credit.

However, Ferguson argues, there was a lack of competition in China, enforced by a monolithic empire which stifled colonial expansion and economic innovation. On the contrary, in Europe, competition was a part of life. Europe itself was politically fragmented and within each monarchy or republic there were multiple competing entities. This competition allowed for a decentralization of both political and economic life, which created the launch-pad for both nation-states and capitalism, and encouraged Europeans to seek opportunities in distant lands.

For Ferguson, the second killer application is science, described as a way of studying, understanding, and ultimately changing the natural world, which gave the West, among other things, a major military advantage in terms of improvements in weaponry. As described in the book, the 16th and 17th centuries were the age of science in Europe, with an extraordinary number of breakthroughs in mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology, putting the West far ahead of the Rest.
Ferguson examines the role of European science in relation to the decline of the Muslim world after 1683, particularly, with the departure of the Ottoman army from Vienna. In that time, the Muslim World was the most powerful civilization on Earth, boasting great advances in mathematics, algebra, astronomy, and chemistry. Nevertheless, according to Ferguson, the descent of the Muslim Empire was triggered not only for a severe fiscal crisis, high corruption, bribery, favouritism, religious conflicts and deterioration in administrative standards, but also for the limitation of science. Religion overshadowed science, giving Europe a huge advantage, particularly in military terms.

Ferguson understands “property rights”, the third Western advantage, as the use of law as a means of protecting private owners and peacefully resolving disputes between them, which formed the basis for the most stable form of representative government. To make his point in this section, Ferguson veers away from “the Rest” and compares the arrival of Spanish conquerors to South America and the English settlers in North America in the 17th century. He concludes that the success of English domination in the U.S can be traced to their conception of property rights inherited from the theories of John Locke. South America, by contrast, implemented a feudal system based on the concentration of lands in the hands of a tiny elite, an arrangement which continues to drive conflict in this region based on inequalities in land distribution and a corresponding lack of democracy. To this day, the Latin American elite have largely maintained control over political power and property rights, resulting in authoritarianism and the extreme concentration of wealth.

The forth killer application is medicine, described as a branch of science that allowed for a major improvement in health and life expectancy. According to Ferguson, the development of Medicine improved quality of life, life expectancy, and productivity in European societies, as well their colonies.

The fifth of the “killer apps” analysed by Ferguson is consumer society, which is understood as a mode of material living in which the production and purchase of clothing and other consumer goods play a central economic role, and without which the Industrial Revolution would have been unsustainable. For Ferguson, consumer society created a huge demand for more, better, and cheaper goods, from cotton garments to enhanced technologies of production.

Ferguson underlines that consumer society was key in the supremacy of West vis-à-vis the Rest, as it enticed the whole world to embrace an entire culture of consumption, encompassing clothing, music and movies, soft drinks and fast food. This consumer society carries with a subtle message. It is about freedom. The right to dress, drink or eat whatever that you want. It is also about democracy and capitalism. This is a reflection of belonging to the West.

According to Ferguson, the sixth killer application is work ethic, described as a moral framework and mode of activity derivable from, among other sources, Protestant Christianity, which provided a measure of stability and duty to balance the dynamic and potentially unstable values created by competition and consumer society.

Ferguson argues that Protestantism was essential to develop capitalism, as adherents devoted themselves to work as a purpose of life, contributing then to reinforce the supremacy of the West. While the U.S. and other colonies have inherited this doctrine, however, China and other Asian countries have long embraced the “love of hard work”, even as this ethic declines in the West.

According to Ferguson, 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.

Ferguson argues that, over the past half-millennium, no civilization has done a better job of finding and educating the geniuses that lurk in the margins of the distribution of talent in any human society. The big question is whether or not the West is still able to recognize the value of that package.

Ferguson, who is also adviser of the British education secretary, concludes that the real threat is posed not by the rise of China, Islam or CO₂ emissions, but by the loss of faith in the civilization that Westerners inherited from their ancestors. Today, he argues, as then, the biggest threat to Western civilization is posed not by other civilizations, but by the historical ignorance that has long been part of Western civilization.
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