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Finally, I offer my deepest thanks to my family, particularly my parents and my oft-neglected children, Felix, Freya and Lachlan, not forgetting their mother Susan and our extended kinship group. In many ways, I have written this book for you, children.

It is dedicated, however, to someone who understands better than anyone I know what Western civilization really means – and what it still has to offer the world.

London December 2010

Introduction: Rasselas's Question

> He would not admit *civilization* [to the fourth edition of his dictionary], but only *civility*. With great deference to him, I thought *civilization*, from *to civilize*, better in the sense opposed to *barbarity*, than *civility*.
>
> James Boswell

> All definitions of civilization ... belong to a conjugation which goes: 'I am civilized, you belong to a culture, he is a barbarian.'
>
> Felipe Fernández-Armesto

When Kenneth Clark defined civilization in his television series of that name, he left viewers in no doubt that he meant the civilization of the West – and primarily the art and architecture of Western Europe from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century. The first of the thirteen films he made for the BBC was politely but firmly dismissive of Byzantine Ravenna, the Celtic Hebrides, Viking Norway and even Charlemagne's Aachen. The Dark Ages between the fall of Rome and the twelfth-century Renaissance simply did not qualify as civilization in Clark's sense of the word. That only revived with the building of Chartres cathedral, dedicated though not completed in 1260, and was showing signs of fatigue with the Manhattan skyscrapers of his own time.

Clark's hugely successful series, which was first broadcast in Britain when I was five years old, defined civilization for a generation in the English-speaking world. Civilization was the chateaux of the

Loire. It was the palazzi of Florence. It was the Sistine Chapel. It was Versailles. From the sober interiors of the Dutch Republic to the ebullient façades of the baroque, Clark played to his strength as an historian of art. Music and literature made their appearances; politics and even economics occasionally peeked in. But the essence of Clark's civilization was clearly High Visual Culture. His heroes were Michelangelo, da Vinci, Dürer, Constable, Turner, Delacroix.[1]

In fairness to Clark, his series was subtitled *A Personal View*. And he was not unaware of the implication – problematic already in 1969 – that 'the pre-Christian era and the East' were in some sense *un*civilized. Nevertheless, with the passage of four decades, it has become steadily harder to live with Clark's view, personal or otherwise (to say nothing of his now slightly grating *de haut en bas* manner). In this book I take a broader, more comparative view, and I aim to be more down and dirty than high and mighty. My idea of civilization is as much about sewage pipes as flying buttresses, if not more so, because without efficient public plumbing cities are death-traps, turning rivers and wells into havens for the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. I am, unapologetically, as interested in the price of a work of art as in its cultural value. 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. Its paintings, statues and buildings may well be its most eye-catching achievements, but they are unintelligible without some understanding of the economic, social and political institutions which devised them, paid for them, executed them – and preserved them for our gaze.

'Civilisation' is a French word, first used by the French economist Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot in 1752, and first published by Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, father of the great revolutionary, four years later.[2] Samuel Johnson, as the first epigraph to this Introduction makes clear, would not accept the neologism, preferring 'civility'. If barbarism had an antonym for Johnson, it was the polite (though sometimes also downright rude) urban life he enjoyed so much in London. A civilization, as the etymology of the word suggests, revolves around its cities, and in many ways it is cities that are the heroes of this book.[3] But a city's laws (civil or otherwise) are as important as its walls; its constitution and customs – its inhabitants' manners (civil or

otherwise) – as important as its palaces.[4] Civilization is as much about scientists' laboratories as it is about artists' garrets. It is as much about forms of land tenure as it is about landscapes. The success of a civilization is measured not just in its aesthetic achievements but also, and surely more importantly, in the duration and quality of life of its citizens. And that quality of life has many dimensions, not all easily quantified. We may be able to estimate the per-capita income of people around the world in the fifteenth century, or their average life expectancy at birth. But what about their comfort? Cleanliness? Happiness? How many garments did they own? How many hours did they have to work? What food could they buy with their wages? Artworks by themselves can offer hints, but they cannot answer such questions.

Clearly, however, one city does not make a civilization. A civilization is the single largest unit of human organization, higher though more amorphous than even an empire. Civilizations are partly a practical response by human populations to their environments – the challenges of feeding, watering, sheltering and defending themselves – but they are also cultural in character; often, though not always, religious; often, though not always, communities of language.[5] They are few, but not far between. Carroll Quigley counted two dozen in the last ten millennia.[6] In the pre-modern world, Adda Bozeman saw just five: the West, India, China, Byzantium and Islam.[7] Matthew Melko made the total twelve, seven of which have vanished (Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Cretan, Classical, Byzantine, Middle American, Andean) and five of which still remain (Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Islamic, Western).[8] Shmuel Eisenstadt counted six by adding Jewish civilization to the club.[9] The interaction of these few civilizations with one another, as much as with their own environments, has been among the most important drivers of historical change.[10] The striking thing about these interactions is that authentic civilizations seem to remain true unto themselves for very long periods, despite outside influences. As Fernand Braudel put it: 'Civilization is in fact the longest story of all . . . A civilization . . . can persist through a series of economies or societies.'[11]

If, in the year 1411, you had been able to circumnavigate the globe, you would probably have been most impressed by the quality of life

in Oriental civilizations. The Forbidden City was under construction in Ming Beijing, while work had begun on reopening and improving the Grand Canal; in the Near East, the Ottomans were closing in on Constantinople, which they would finally capture in 1453. The Byzantine Empire was breathing its last. The death of the warlord Timur (Tamerlane) in 1405 had removed the recurrent threat of murderous invading hordes from Central Asia – the antithesis of civilization. For the Yongle Emperor in China and the Ottoman Sultan Murad II, the future was bright.

By contrast, Western Europe in 1411 would have struck you as a miserable backwater, recuperating from the ravages of the Black Death – which had reduced population by as much as half as it swept eastwards between 1347 and 1351 – and still plagued by bad sanitation and seemingly incessant war. In England the leper king Henry IV was on the throne, having successfully overthrown and murdered the ill-starred Richard II. France was in the grip of internecine warfare between the followers of the Duke of Burgundy and those of the assassinated Duke of Orléans. The Anglo-French Hundred Years' War was just about to resume. The other quarrelsome kingdoms of Western Europe – Aragon, Castile, Navarre, Portugal and Scotland – would have seemed little better. A Muslim still ruled in Granada. The Scottish King, James I, was a prisoner in England, having been captured by English pirates. The most prosperous parts of Europe were in fact the North Italian city-states: Florence, Genoa, Pisa, Siena and Venice. As for fifteenth-century North America, it was an anarchic wilderness compared with the realms of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas in Central and South America, with their towering temples and skyscraping roads. 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.

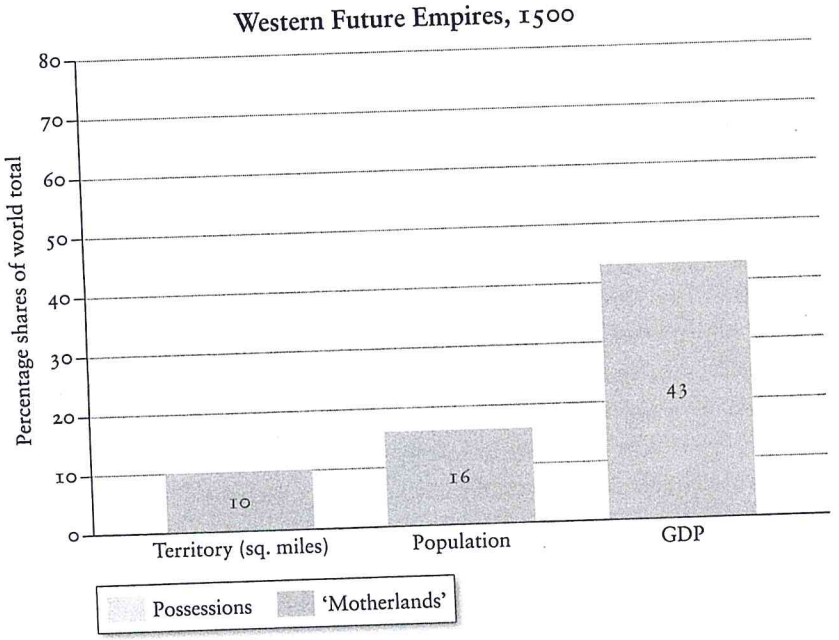
For some reason, beginning in the late fifteenth century, the little states of Western Europe, with their bastardized linguistic borrowings from Latin (and a little Greek), their religion derived from the teachings of a Jew from Nazareth and their intellectual debts to Oriental mathematics, astronomy and technology, produced a civilization capable not only of conquering the great Oriental empires and subjugating

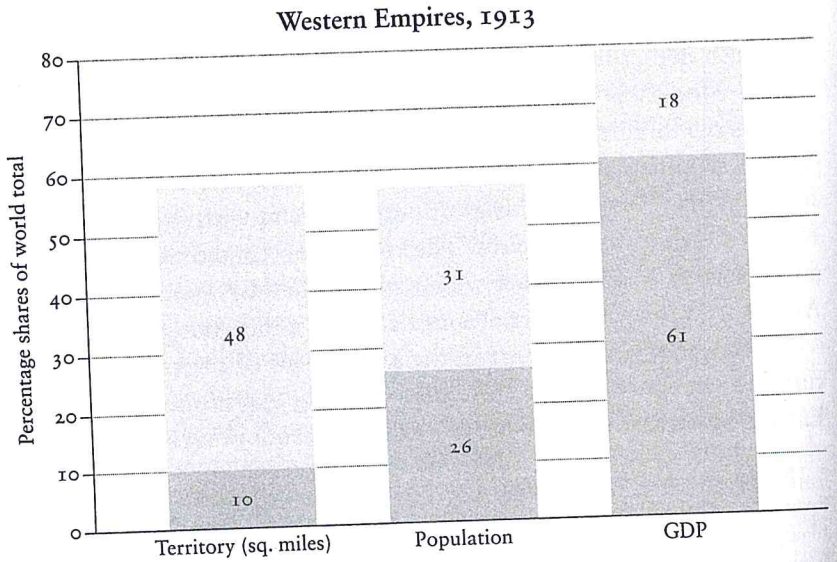
Africa, the Americas and Australasia, but also of converting peoples all over the world to the Western way of life – a conversion achieved ultimately more by the word than by the sword.

There are those who dispute that, claiming that all civilizations are in some sense equal, and that the West cannot claim superiority over, say, the East of Eurasia.[12] But such relativism is demonstrably absurd. No previous civilization had ever achieved such dominance as the West achieved over the Rest.[13] In 1500 the future imperial powers of Europe accounted for about 10 per cent of the world's land surface and at most 16 per cent of its population. By 1913, eleven Western empires* controlled nearly three-fifths of all territory and population and more than three-quarters (a staggering 79 per cent) of global economic output.[14] Average life expectancy in England was nearly twice what it was in India. Higher living standards in the West were also reflected in a better diet, even for agricultural labourers, and taller stature, even for ordinary soldiers and convicts.[15] Civilization, as we have seen, is about cities. By this measure, too, the West had come out on top. In 1500, as far as we can work out, the biggest city in the world was Beijing, with a population of between 600,000 and 700,000. Of the ten largest cities in the world by that time only one – Paris – was European, and its population numbered fewer than 200,000. London had perhaps 50,000 inhabitants. Urbanization rates were also higher in North Africa and South America than in Europe. Yet by 1900 there had been an astonishing reversal. Only one of the world's ten largest cities at that time was Asian and that was Tokyo. With a population of around 6.5 million, London was the global megalopolis.[16] Nor did Western dominance end with the decline and fall of the European empires. The rise of the United States saw the gap between West and East widen still further. By 1990 the average American was seventy-three times richer than the average Chinese.[17]

Moreover, it became clear in the second half of the twentieth century that the only way to close that yawning gap in income was for Eastern societies to follow Japan's example in adopting some (though

* The eleven were Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Of these only France, Portugal and Spain existed in 1500 in anything resembling their early twentieth-century form. For Russia's claim to be considered a part of the West, see below.





not all) of the West's institutions and modes of operation. As a result, Western civilization became a kind of template for the way the rest of the world aspired to organize itself. Prior to 1945, of course, there was a variety of developmental models – or operating systems, to draw a metaphor from computing – that could be adopted by non-Western societies. But the most attractive were all of European origin: liberal capitalism, national socialism, Soviet communism. The Second World War killed the second in Europe, though it lived on under assumed names in many developing countries. The collapse of the Soviet empire between 1989 and 1991 killed the third.

To be sure, there has been much talk in the wake of the global financial crisis about alternative Asian economic models. But not even the most ardent cultural relativist is recommending a return to the institutions of the Ming dynasty or the Mughals. The current debate between the proponents of free markets and those of state intervention is, at root, a debate between identifiably Western schools of thought: the followers of Adam Smith and those of John Maynard Keynes, with a few die-hard devotees of Karl Marx still plugging away. The birthplaces of all three speak for themselves: Kirkcaldy, Cambridge, Trier. In practice, most of the world is now integrated into a Western economic system in which, as Smith recommended, the market sets most of the prices and determines the flow of trade and division of labour, but government plays a role closer to the one envisaged by Keynes, intervening to try to smooth the business cycle and reduce income inequality.

As for non-economic institutions, there is no debate worth having. All over the world, universities are converging on Western norms. The same is true of the way medical science is organized, from rarefied research all the way through to front-line healthcare. Most people now accept the great scientific truths revealed by Newton, Darwin and Einstein and, even if they do not, they still reach eagerly for the products of Western pharmacology at the first symptom of influenza or bronchitis. Only a few societies continue to resist the encroachment of Western patterns of marketing and consumption, as well as the Western lifestyle itself. More and more human beings eat a Western diet, wear Western clothes and live in Western housing. Even the peculiarly Western way of work – five or six days a week from 9 until 5,

with two or three weeks of holiday – is becoming a kind of universal standard. Meanwhile, the religion that Western missionaries sought to export to the rest of the world is followed by a third of mankind – as well as making remarkable gains in the world's most populous country. Even the atheism pioneered in the West is making impressive headway.

With every passing year, more and more human beings shop like us, study like us, stay healthy (or unhealthy) like us and pray (or don't pray) like us. Burgers, Bunsen burners, Band-Aids, baseball caps and Bibles: you cannot easily get away from them, wherever you may go. Only in the realm of political institutions does there remain significant global diversity, with a wide range of governments around the world resisting the idea of the rule of law, with its protection of individual rights, as the foundation for meaningful representative government. It is as much as a political ideology as a religion that a militant Islam seeks to resist the advance of the late twentieth-century Western norms of gender equality and sexual freedom.[18]

So it is not 'Eurocentrism' or (anti-)'Orientalism' to say that the rise of Western civilization is the single most important historical phenomenon of the second half of the second millennium after Christ. It is a statement of the obvious. The challenge is to explain how it happened. What was it about the civilization of Western Europe after the fifteenth century that allowed it to trump the outwardly superior empires of the Orient? Clearly, it was something more than the beauty of the Sistine Chapel.

The facile, if not tautological, answer to the question is that the West dominated the Rest because of imperialism.[19] There are still many people today who can work themselves up into a state of high moral indignation over the misdeeds of the European empires. Misdeeds there certainly were, and they are not absent from these pages. It is also clear that different forms of colonization – settlement versus extraction – had very different long-term impacts.[20] But empire is not a historically sufficient explanation of Western predominance. There were empires long before the imperialism denounced by the Marxist-Leninists. Indeed, the sixteenth century saw a number of Asian empires increase significantly in their power and extent. Meanwhile, after the failure of Charles V's project of a grand Habsburg empire

stretching from Spain through the Low Countries to Germany, Europe grew more fragmented than ever. The Reformation unleashed more than a century of European wars of religion.

A sixteenth-century traveller could hardly have failed to notice the contrast. In addition to covering Anatolia, Egypt, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Yemen, the Ottoman Empire under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–66) extended into the Balkans and Hungary, menacing the gates of Vienna in 1529. Further east, the Safavid Empire under Abbas I (1587–1629) stretched all the way from Isfahan and Tabriz to Kandahar, while Northern India from Delhi to Bengal was ruled by the mighty Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605). Ming China, too, seemed serene and secure behind the Great Wall. Few European visitors to the court of the Wanli Emperor (1572–1620) can have anticipated the fall of his dynasty less than three decades after his death. Writing from Istanbul in the late 1550s, the Flemish diplomat Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq – the man who transplanted tulips from Turkey to the Netherlands – nervously compared Europe's fractured state with the 'vast wealth' of the Ottoman Empire.

True, the sixteenth century was a time of hectic European activity overseas. But to the great Oriental empires the Portuguese and Dutch seafarers seemed the very opposite of bearers of civilization; they were merely the latest barbarians to menace the Middle Kingdom, if anything more loathsome – and certainly more malodorous – than the pirates of Japan. And what else attracted Europeans to Asia but the superior quality of Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain?

As late as 1683, an Ottoman army could march to the gates of Vienna – the capital of the Habsburg Empire – and demand that the city's population surrender and convert to Islam. It was only after the raising of the siege that Christendom could begin slowly rolling back Ottoman power in Central and Eastern Europe through the Balkans towards the Bosphorus, and it took many years before any European empire could match the achievements of Oriental imperialism. The 'great divergence' between the West and the Rest was even slower to materialize elsewhere. The material gap between North and South America was not firmly established until well into the nineteenth century, and most of Africa was not subjugated by Europeans beyond a few coastal strips until the early twentieth.

If Western ascendancy cannot therefore be explained in the tired old terms of imperialism, was it simply – as some scholars maintain – a matter of good luck? Was it the geography or the climate of the western end of Eurasia that made the great divergence happen? Were the Europeans just fortunate to stumble across the islands of the Caribbean, so ideally suited to the cultivation of calorie-rich sugar? Did the New World provide Europe with 'ghost acres' that China lacked? And was it just sod's law that made China's coal deposits harder to mine and transport than Europe's?[21] Or was China in some sense a victim of its own success – stuck in a 'high-level equilibrium trap' by the ability of its cultivators to provide a vast number of people with just enough calories to live?[22] Can it really be that England became the first industrial nation mainly because bad sanitation and disease kept life exceptionally short for the majority of people, giving the rich and enterprising minority a better chance to pass on their genes?[23]

The immortal English lexicographer Samuel Johnson rejected all such contingent explanations for Western ascendancy. In his *History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia*, published in 1759, he has Rasselas ask:

> By what means . . . are the Europeans thus powerful? or 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 same wind that carries them back would bring us thither.*

To which the philosopher Imlac replies:

> They are more powerful, Sir, than we, 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.[24]

Knowledge is indeed power if it provides superior ways of sailing ships, digging up minerals, firing guns and curing sickness. But is it in

* This question was indeed being posed in non-Western empires in the eighteenth century. In 1731 the Ottoman writer İbrahim Müteferrika asked: 'Why do Christian nations, which were so weak in the past compared with Muslim nations, begin to dominate so many lands in modern times and even defeat the once victorious Ottoman armies?'

fact the case that Europeans were more knowledgeable than other people? Perhaps by 1759 they were; scientific innovation for around two and a half centuries after 1650 was almost exclusively Western in origin.[25] But in 1500? As we shall see, Chinese technology, Indian mathematics and Arab astronomy had been far ahead for centuries.

Was it therefore a more nebulous cultural difference that equipped Europeans to leap ahead of their Oriental counterparts? That was the argument made by the German sociologist Max Weber. It comes in many variants – medieval English individualism, humanism and the Protestant ethic – and it has been sought everywhere from the wills of English farmers to the account books of Mediterranean merchants and the rules of etiquette of royal courts. In *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, David Landes made the cultural case by arguing that Western Europe led the world in developing autonomous intellectual inquiry, the scientific method of verification and the rationalization of research and its diffusion. Yet even he allowed that something more was required for that mode of operation to flourish: financial intermediaries and good government.[26] The key, it becomes ever more apparent, lies with institutions.

Institutions are, of course, in some sense the products of culture. But, because they formalize a set of norms, institutions are often the things that keep a culture honest, determining how far it is conducive to good behaviour rather than bad. To illustrate the point, the twentieth century ran a series of experiments, imposing quite different institutions on two sets of Germans (in West and East), two sets of Koreans (in North and South) and two sets of Chinese (inside and outside the People's Republic). The results were very striking and the lesson crystal clear. If you take the same people, with more or less the same culture, and impose communist institutions on one group and capitalist institutions on another, almost immediately there will be a divergence in the way they behave.

Many historians today would agree that there were few really profound differences between the eastern and western ends of Eurasia in the 1500s. Both regions were early adopters of agriculture, market-based exchange and urban-centred state structures.[27] But there was one crucial institutional difference. In China a monolithic empire had been consolidated, while Europe remained politically fragmented. In *Guns,*

Germs and Steel, Jared Diamond explained why Eurasia had advanced ahead of the rest of the world.[28] But not until his essay 'How to Get Rich' (1999) did he offer an answer to the question of why one end of Eurasia forged so far ahead of the other. The answer was that, in the plains of Eastern Eurasia, monolithic Oriental empires stifled innovation, while in mountainous, river-divided Western Eurasia, multiple monarchies and city-states engaged in creative competition and communication.[29]

It is an appealing answer. And yet it cannot be a sufficient one. Look only at the two series of engravings entitled *Miseries of War*, published by the Lorraine artist Jacques Callot in the 1630s as if to warn the rest of the world of the dangers of religious conflict. The competition between and within Europe's petty states in the first half of the seventeenth century was disastrous, depopulating large tracts of Central Europe as well as plunging the British Isles into more than a century of recurrent, debilitating strife. Political fragmentation often has that effect. If you doubt it, ask the inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia. Competition is certainly a part of the story of Western ascendancy, as we shall see in Chapter 1 – but only a part.

In this book I want to show that what distinguished the West from the Rest – the mainsprings of global power – were six identifiably novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas and behaviours. For the sake of simplicity, I summarize them under six headings:

1. Competition
2. Science
3. Property rights
4. Medicine
5. The consumer society
6. The work ethic

To use the language of today's computerized, synchronized world, these were the six killer applications – the killer apps – that allowed a minority of mankind originating on the western edge of Eurasia to dominate the world for the better part of 500 years.

Now, before you indignantly write to me objecting that I have missed out some crucial aspect of Western ascendancy, such as capitalism

or freedom or democracy (or for that matter guns, germs and steel), please read the following brief definitions:

1. Competition – a decentralization of both political and economic life, which created the launch-pad for both nation-states and capitalism
2. Science – a way of studying, understanding and ultimately changing the natural world, which gave the West (among other things) a major military advantage over the Rest
3. Property rights – the rule 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
4. Medicine – a branch of science that allowed a major improvement in health and life expectancy, beginning in Western societies, but also in their colonies
5. The consumer society – 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
6. The work ethic – a moral framework and mode of activity derivable from (among other sources) Protestant Christianity, which provides the glue for the dynamic and potentially unstable society created by apps 1 to 5

Make no mistake: this is not another self-satisfied version of 'The Triumph of the West'.[30] I want to show that it was not just Western superiority that led to the conquest and colonization of so much of the rest of the world; it was also the fortuitous weakness of the West's rivals. In the 1640s, for example, a combination of fiscal and monetary crisis, climate change and epidemic disease unleashed rebellion and the final crisis of the Ming dynasty. This had nothing to do with the West. Likewise, the political and military decline of the Ottoman Empire was internally driven more than it was externally imposed. North American political institutions flourished as South America's festered; but Simón Bolívar's failure to create a United States of Latin America was not the gringo's fault.

The critical point is that the differential between the West and the

Rest was institutional. Western Europe overtook China partly because in the West there was more competition in both the political and the economic spheres. Austria, Prussia and latterly even Russia became more effective administratively and militarily because the network that produced the Scientific Revolution arose in the Christian but not in the Muslim world. The reason North America's ex-colonies did so much better than South America's was because British settlers established a completely different system of property rights and political representation in the North from those built by Spaniards and Portuguese in the South. (The North was an 'open access order', rather than a closed one run in the interests of rent-seeking, exclusive elites.)[31] European empires were able to penetrate Africa not just because they had the Maxim gun; they also devised vaccines against tropical diseases to which Africans were just as vulnerable.

In the same way, the earlier industrialization of the West reflected institutional advantages: the possibility of a mass consumer society existed in the British Isles well before the advent and spread of steam power or the factory system. Even after industrial technology was almost universally available, the differential between the West and the Rest persisted; indeed, it grew wider. With wholly standardized cotton-spinning and weaving machinery, the European or North American worker was still able to work more productively, and his capitalist employer to accumulate wealth more rapidly, than their Oriental counterparts.[32] Investment in public health and public education paid big dividends; where there was none, people stayed poor.[33] This book is about all these differences – why they existed and why they mattered so much.

Thus far I have used words like 'West' and 'Western' more or less casually. But what exactly – or where – do I mean by 'Western civilization'? Post-war White Anglo-Saxon Protestant males used more or less instinctively to locate the West (also known as 'the free world') in a relatively narrow corridor extending (certainly) from London to Lexington, Massachusetts, and (possibly) from Strasbourg to San Francisco. In 1945, fresh from the battlefields, the West's first language was English, followed by halting French. With the success of European integration in the 1950s and 1960s, the Western club grew larger. Few would now dispute that the Low Countries, France, Germany, Italy,

Portugal, Scandinavia and Spain all belong to the West, while Greece is an *ex officio* member, despite its later allegiance to Orthodox Christianity, thanks to our enduring debt to ancient Hellenic philosophy and the Greeks' more recent debts to the European Union.

But what about the rest of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, encompassing not just the Balkans north of the Peloponnese, but also North Africa and Anatolia? What about Egypt and Mesopotamia, the seedbeds of the very first civilizations? Is South America – colonized by Europeans as surely as was North America, and geographically in the same hemisphere – part of the West? And what of Russia? Is European Russia truly Occidental, but Russia beyond the Urals in some sense part of the Orient? Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its satellites were referred to as 'the Eastern bloc'. But there is surely a case for saying that the Soviet Union was as much a product of Western civilization as the United States. Its core ideology had much the same Victorian provenance as nationalism, anti-slavery and women's suffrage – it was born and bred in the old circular Reading Room of the British Library. And its geographical extent was no less the product of European expansion and colonization than the settlement of the Americas. In Central Asia, as in South America, Europeans ruled over non-Europeans. In that sense, what happened in 1991 was simply the death of the last European empire. Yet the most influential recent definition of Western civilization, by Samuel Huntington, excludes not just Russia but all countries with a religious tradition of Orthodoxy. Huntington's West consists only of Western and Central Europe (excluding the Orthodox East), North America (excluding Mexico) and Australasia. Greece, Israel, Romania and Ukraine do not make the cut; nor do the Caribbean islands, despite the fact that many are as Western as Florida.[34]

'The West', then, is much more than just a geographical expression. It is a set of norms, behaviours and institutions with borders that are blurred in the extreme. The implications of that are worth pondering. Might it in fact be possible for an Asian society to become Western if it embraces Western norms of dressing and doing business, as Japan did from the Meiji era, and as much of the rest of Asia now seems to be doing? It was once fashionable to insist that the capitalist 'world-system' imposed a permanent division of labour between the

Western core and the Rest's periphery.[35] But what if the whole world eventually ends up being Westernized, in appearance and lifestyle at least? Or could it be that the other civilizations are, as Huntington famously argued, more resilient – particularly 'Sinic' civilization, meaning Greater China,* and Islam, with its 'bloody borders and innards'?[36] How far is their adoption of Western modes of operation merely a superficial modernization without any cultural depth? These are questions that will be addressed below.

Another puzzle about Western civilization is that disunity appears to be one of its defining characteristics. In the early 2000s many American commentators complained about the 'widening Atlantic' – the breakdown of those common values that bound the United States together with its West European allies during the Cold War.[37] If it has become slightly clearer than it was when Henry Kissinger was secretary of state whom an American statesman should call when he wants to speak to Europe, it has become harder to say who picks up the phone on behalf of Western civilization. Yet the current division between America and 'Old Europe' is mild and amicable compared with the great schisms of the past, over religion, over ideology – and even over the meaning of civilization itself. During the First World War, the Germans claimed to be fighting the war for a higher *Kultur* and against tawdry, materialistic Anglo-French *civilisation* (the distinction was drawn by Thomas Mann and Sigmund Freud, among others). But this distinction was hard to reconcile with the burning of the Leuven University library and the summary executions of Belgian civilians in the first phase of the war. British propagandists retorted by defining the Germans as 'Huns' – barbarians beyond the Pale of civilization – and named the war itself 'The Great War for Civilization' on their Victory medal.[38] Is it any more meaningful to talk today about 'the West' as a unitary civilization than it was in 1918?

Finally, it is worth remembering that Western civilization has declined and fallen once before. The Roman ruins scattered all over Europe, North Africa and the Near East serve as potent reminders of

* It is an idiosyncratic notion that one of the world's most venerable civilizations should have a name that no one but a political theorist has ever heard of. In his original 1993 essay, Huntington used 'Confucian'.

that. The first version of the West – Western Civilization 1.0 – arose in the so-called Fertile Crescent stretching from the Nile Valley to the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and reached its twin peaks with Athenian democracy and the Roman Empire.[39] Key elements of our civilization today – not only democracy but also athletics, arithmetic, civil law, geometry, the classical style of architecture and a substantial proportion of the words in modern English – had their origins in the ancient West. In its heyday, the Roman Empire was a startlingly sophisticated system. Grain, manufactures and coins circulated in an economy that stretched from the north of England to the upper reaches of the Nile, scholarship flourished, there was law, medicine and even shopping malls like Trajan's Forum in Rome. But that version of Western civilization declined and then fell with dramatic speed in the fifth century AD, undone by barbarian invasions and internal divisions. In the space of a generation, the vast imperial metropolis of Rome fell into disrepair, the aqueducts broken, the splendid market places deserted. The knowledge of the classical West would have been lost altogether, but for the librarians of Byzantium,[40] the monks of Ireland[41] and the popes and priests of the Roman Catholic Church – not forgetting the Abbasid caliphs.[42] Without their stewardship, the civilization of the West could not have been reborn as it was in the Italy of the Renaissance.

Is decline and fall the looming fate of Western Civilization 2.0? In demographic terms, the population of Western societies has long represented a minority of the world's inhabitants, but today it is clearly a dwindling one. Once so dominant, the economies of the United States and Europe are now facing the real prospect of being overtaken by China within twenty or even ten years, with Brazil and India not so very far behind. Western 'hard power' seems to be struggling in the Greater Middle East, from Iraq to Afghanistan, just as the 'Washington Consensus' on free-market economic policy disintegrates. The financial crisis that began in 2007 also seems to indicate a fundamental flaw at the heart of the consumer society, with its emphasis on debt-propelled retail therapy. The Protestant ethic of thrift that once seemed so central to the Western project has all but vanished. Meanwhile, Western elites are beset by almost millenarian fears of a coming environmental apocalypse.

What is more, Western civilization appears to have lost confidence

in itself. Beginning with Stanford in 1963, a succession of major universities have ceased to offer the classic 'Western Civ.' history course to their undergraduates. In schools, too, the grand narrative of Western ascent has fallen out of fashion. Thanks to an educationalists' fad that elevated 'historical skills' above knowledge in the name of 'New History' – combined with the unintended consequences of the curriculum-reform process – too many British schoolchildren leave secondary school knowing only unconnected fragments of Western history: Henry VIII and Hitler, with a small dose of Martin Luther King, Jr. A survey of first-year History undergraduates at one leading British university revealed that only 34 per cent knew who was the English monarch at the time of the Armada, 31 per cent knew the location of the Boer War, 16 per cent knew who commanded the British forces at Waterloo (more than twice that proportion thought it was Nelson rather than Wellington) and 11 per cent could name a single nineteenth-century British prime minister.[43] In a similar poll of English children aged between eleven and eighteen, 17 per cent thought Oliver Cromwell fought at the Battle of Hastings and 25 per cent put the First World War in the wrong century.[44] Throughout the English-speaking world, moreover, the argument has gained ground that it is other cultures we should study, not our own. The musical sampler sent into outer space with the *Voyager* spacecraft in 1977 featured twenty-seven tracks, only ten of them from Western composers, including not only Bach, Mozart and Beethoven but also Louis Armstrong, Chuck Berry and Blind Willie Johnson. A history of the world 'in 100 objects', published by the Director of the British Museum in 2010, included no more than thirty products of Western civilization.[45]

Yet any history of the world's civilizations that underplays the degree of their gradual subordination to the West after 1500 is missing the essential point – the thing most in need of explanation. The rise of the West is, quite simply, the pre-eminent historical phenomenon of the second half of the second millennium after Christ. It is the story at the very heart of modern history. It is perhaps the most challenging riddle historians have to solve. And we should solve it not merely to satisfy our curiosity. For it is only by identifying the true causes of Western ascendancy that we can hope to estimate with any degree of accuracy the imminence of our decline and fall.

I

Competition

China seems to have been long stationary, and had probably long ago acquired that full complement of riches which is consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions. But this complement may be much inferior to what, with other laws and institutions, the nature of its soil, climate, and situation might admit of. A country which neglects or despises foreign commerce, and which admits the vessels of foreign nations into one or two of its ports only, cannot transact the same quantity of business which it might do with different laws and institutions . . . A more extensive foreign trade . . . could scarce fail to increase very much the manufactures of China, and to improve very much the productive powers of its manufacturing industry. By a more extensive navigation, the Chinese would naturally learn the art of using and constructing themselves all the different machines made use of in other countries, as well as the other improvements of art and industry which are practised in all the different parts of the world.

Adam Smith

Why are they small and yet strong? Why are we large and yet weak? . . . What we have to learn from the barbarians is only . . . solid ships and effective guns.

Feng Guifen