

On top of the world

Ian Morris

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Why the West's present dominance is both recent and temporary

IAN MORRIS, a polymathic Stanford University professor of classics and history, has written a remarkable book that may come to be as widely read as Paul Kennedy's 1987 work, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers". Like Mr Kennedy's epic, Mr Morris's "Why the West Rules—For Now" uses history and an overarching theory to address the anxieties of the present. Mr Kennedy warned American policymakers of the consequences of "imperial overstretch", although it was the sudden implosion of the Soviet Union that proved the most spectacular vindication of his thesis.

For his part, Mr Morris sets out to show two things that are just as important; first that civilisations throughout history have waxed and waned, usually for reasons their rulers were powerless to influence, and second, that the West's dominance of the past 200 years was neither inevitable nor "locked in" for the future.

Mr Morris's refrain is "maps, not chaps"—the belief that human destiny is mostly shaped by geography and the efforts of ordinary people to cope with whatever is thrown at them in the form of climate change, famine, migration, disease and state failure (what the author describes as the "five horsemen of the apocalypse"). He argues that "history teaches us that when the pressure is on, change takes off." According to what he calls, somewhat annoyingly, the Morris Theorem, "Change is caused by lazy, greedy, frightened people looking for easier, more profitable and safer ways of doing things. And they rarely know what they are doing."

Among the many things the author sets out to explain is why, throughout human history, social development has gone in fits and starts, sometimes retreating in one place for a millennium or two before suddenly spurting forward again elsewhere. As a way of dramatising this, Mr Morris presents these ebbs and flows in the form of a contest between East and West. Why, he asks, did British boats shoot their way up the Yangzi in 1842 rather than Chinese ones up the Thames, and why do many more people from the East speak English than Europeans speak Mandarin?

At first glance the answer is obvious. The industrial revolution began in the West in the late 18th century thanks primarily to the efforts of British engineers and entrepreneurs who sought to exploit the energy from the country's abundant coal

stocks and use it to harness the power of steam to drive ships, trains and machines in factories. The rapid march of technology gave Britain a temporary edge over every other country and allowed it to project both economic and maritime military power on a global scale that remained virtually unchallenged for most of the next 100 years, and to establish the ascendancy of the West that continues today. But why did China, with its sophisticated textile industry, advanced metallurgy, massive supplies of coal and lots of clever, inventive people not get there first? After all, a couple of centuries earlier it had been higher up the social-development scale than Britain, or indeed anywhere else in the West.

And why, come to that, was Britain, rather than China, the foremost naval power of the age? More than 80 years before Christopher Columbus set sail for America with 90 seamen in three small ships, the Chinese admiral, Zheng He, was exploring the coasts of Africa and India with a total of nearly 300 much bigger vessels and 27,000 men. Mr Morris observes: “Zheng had magnetic compasses and knew enough about the Indian Ocean to fill a 21-foot-long sea chart; Columbus rarely knew where he was, let alone where he was going.”

Mr Morris begins his story more than 50,000 years ago, but it only really gets going with the beginning of agriculture and the birth of large-scale organised societies after the last ice age, around 12,000 years ago. He shows how successive civilisations radiated outward from two geographically distinct cores—the “hilly flanks” of western Eurasia and the area between the Yangzi and Yellow rivers in modern China—because of their relative abundance of domesticable plants and animals. Development started in the West about 2,000 years before similar advances got going in the East. Its lead shrank from about 1,000BC on, after which East and West were roughly level until the slow collapse of the Roman empire, which represented a peak of Western social development not matched until the start of the early modern era in the 17th century.

What Mr Morris shows is that over a period of 10,000 years one civilisation after another hit a “hard ceiling” of social development before falling apart, unable to control the forces its success had unleashed. For every two or three steps forward, there was at least one step back. During those periods of advance the West tended to pull ahead of the East, and during the steps back the gap narrowed again. On this went in a series of waves, each, Mr Morris says, cresting higher than the last, but with the West’s lead apparently locked in. That process continued until the middle of the sixth century AD when the East suddenly, and for the first time, spurred ahead as Europe entered the so-called Dark Ages and the Sui dynasty united China, laying the foundations for the East to hold the lead for the next 1,000 years.

Although the West eventually caught up, thanks in part because it began making ships that could sail to America (the Atlantic is much smaller than the Pacific) and because its constant wars helped develop military technology, even by the mid-18th century

there was not much difference between East and West. As Mr Morris observes: “...although the hard ceiling had been pushed up a little, it remained as hard as ever.” The West may have caught up, but according to a new breed of political economists, such as Thomas Malthus, iron laws governing humanity, in particular the one that held that people always converted the extra wealth earned from rising productivity into more babies to consume it, would prevent either the West’s or the East’s social development score rising much further. Malthus, however, had not reckoned on the transformative power of steam to smash through the West’s hard ceiling.

Towards the end of his book, Mr Morris attempts to answer the question posed in the title. The West may still rule, but for how much longer? His conclusion is that although power, influence and commercial dynamism are shifting eastward at a relentless pace, the question itself may be wrong. If Eastern and Western social development scores continue rising at their current rates, Western “rule” will end early in the next century. But the rise in the index over the next 100 years, propelled by quantum leaps in computing power and bioscience, is so exponential that humankind itself will be profoundly changed, making distinctions between East and West seem weirdly anachronistic.

There is, on the other hand, a real possibility that we fail to negotiate even the next 50 years without triggering environmental catastrophe, global pandemics or nuclear war. In which case, both West and East will simultaneously crash into the hard ceiling of our own era. Mr Morris ends on an optimistic note. If we can put off “Nightfall” long enough, he says, the difference between the trials we face today and those that eventually did in the Song dynasty in China when it pressed against the hard ceiling 1,000 years ago, or the Roman empire 1,000 years before that, is that we are so much more able to understand and counter the forces that threaten us—if we have the wit and purpose to do so.

Mr Morris writes with clarity and vigour, if occasionally with a jaunty informality that becomes tiresome. That said, this is an important book—one that challenges, stimulates and entertains. Anyone who does not believe there are lessons to be learned from history should start here.