

Review Article

Why the West rules – for now: the patterns of history and what they reveal about the future

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Many positive things can be said about this book. Its author who teaches classics, history, and archaeology at Stanford University writes very well. He is extremely knowledgeable and has many interesting things to say. One can learn a lot reading his book. In my view, though, in the end it is a failure when it comes to exactly the main goals that the author sets himself: to find patterns in the past and to use them to answer the question why the West rules and whether it will continue to do so. The failure to predict the future need not surprise us: such an endeavour is doomed to fail and end in speculation, as we all know since Popper discussed this scientific pipe dream. The failure to explain the past – and the present – is more annoying. The book contains an enormous amount of often interesting facts, observations, and comments, but it simply does not tell us why the West rules. These are harsh words. Normally, I would not review a book that I consider a failure. But this one has received such wide and exuberant praise that some critical comments are in order.¹

The book is ambitious and its author confident in presenting his theory about differences in global

development, that he defines as ‘societies’ abilities to get things done’ (p. 24). In its first two parts Morris shows that the West has normally been more developed than ‘the Rest’ and, more importantly, tries to explain how Western development became so high that over the last two centuries the West could ‘rule’ the entire planet. At a first glance that looks simple: ‘Nearly everyone agrees that the West rules because the industrial revolution happened there, not in the East’ (p. 11). Industrialization did, indeed, cause a global economic divergence in the nineteenth century, just when technological advances also gave an enormous boost to Western military power. But that of course only makes one wonder why it was the West that industrialized and improved its military technology. Morris aims to find that out by comparing the history of development of the western and the eastern extremities of Eurasia, the regions that have commonly been regarded as the most developed parts of the world (p. 32). Not many people would object to that. That he includes what we nowadays call ‘the Middle East’ in the West (p. 31), is a far less obvious move.

Morris comes up with four indicators of development: energy capture, organization (measured via the size of the largest city in the society one analyses), war-making capacity, and the available information technology. With those indicators he composes a development index covering many thousands of years. The interested reader is referred to an appendix and a database on his website. One can only sympathize with the endeavour, be impressed by the work Morris has done, and admit that this is the way to go, even if one might have doubts about the actual figures that he presents and the way in which he interprets them.

Many people have already written about ‘the rise of the West’. What distinguishes Morris from his predecessors? In his view, two perspectives have dominated scholarship: one that produces ‘long-

1 See, for example, the flap of the book and the list of often extremely positive reviews collected on Amazon’s website.

term lock-in theories' and one that produces 'short-term accident theories'. He rejects both. 'Long-termers' are said to claim that the West has been fundamentally different and 'exceptional' from time immemorial and that industrialization could only – and would inevitably – happen there (pp. 13–15). In the 1990s, a group of 'revisionists', such as Pomeranz, Wong, Goldstone, and Frank, emerged, who look at Western rule (which they almost exclusively discuss in terms of *wealth*) as 'just a recent, freakish accident' (p. 21). According to Morris, one can only answer the 'why-the-West-ruled question' by looking at 'the whole sweep of human history as a single story, establishing its overall shape, before discussing why it has that shape' (p. 22). He sets out to do just that, starting at the very beginning of history. His index suggests that, over the entire path of known history, *apart* from the period from about 550 CE to roughly the 1770s, the West has always been more developed than 'the Rest'.

On the basis of a logic that escapes me, Morris claims that the explanation of Western primacy since the late eighteenth century has to combine long-term and short-term perspectives (pp. 25–6). To do that satisfactorily, one must use a broad interdisciplinary approach, in which he considers three tools as essential. The first one is biology (p. 26). That provides him with a couple of fundamental insights: people are clever chimps; they extract energy from the environment; they are curious; and, crucial in his perception, in large groups they, 'as opposed to individuals, *are* all much the same' (p. 27; see also pp. 29, 559). The second one is sociology, or rather those branches of the social sciences 'that generalize about how all societies work' (p. 27). Sociology provides him with what he calls 'the Morris theorem'; it reads: 'Change is caused by lazy, greedy, frightened people looking for easier, more profitable, and safer ways to do things' (p. 28). Strikingly enough, this enormous generalization is presented without *any* empirical underpinning or references to empirical studies by others. His third tool is geography, in particular human and economic geography (p. 29).

Morris makes no bones about the fact that he starts from the assumption that 'culture, values, and beliefs were unimportant' and wants to seek the reason why the West rules 'entirely in brute material forces' (p. 29). He thinks that 'culture and free will never trump biology, sociology, and geography for long' (p. 571). Those are the 'deep forces' that push history in a certain

direction (p. 620). He summarizes his findings as follows:

The West rules because of geography. Biology tells us why humans push social development upward; sociology tells us how they do this (except when they don't); and geography tells us why the West, rather than some other region, has for the last two hundred years dominated the globe. Biology and sociology provide universal laws, applying to all humans in all times and places; geography explains differences. (p. 557; see also, for example, p. 30)

This boils down to the thesis that 'maps' make history and not 'chaps' (p. 29; see also pp. 331, 427, 430). Geography sets the stage for human activity and provides people with challenges, to which they (have to) respond (p. 28). This 'adaptive' view transpires in Morris's favourite quote: 'Each age gets the thought it needs' (see, for example, pp. 423, 476, 481, 506, 568). If other people had been located and challenged as the inhabitants of western Europe were, they would have developed and thought like them (pp. 500, 565).

For Morris, history is not just 'one damn thing after another'. It is 'the same old same old, a single grand and relentless process of adaptations to the world that always generate new problems that call for further adaptations' (p. 560). Rising social development, however, creates the very forces that undermine it. Geographical advantages are ultimately self-defeating (pp. 28–9, 560). Whereas the most developed hit their ceiling, there are 'advantages of backwardness' for the less developed (see the Index).

The historical patterns that Morris claims to have discovered are used to explain historical developments. The book is full of statements about their likelihood, probability, or near inevitability (see, for example pp. 501, 572, 575–7). It provides a clear example of the effort to 'use the past to foresee the future' (p. 581). Part Three is largely devoted to that effort. For Morris it is all but inevitable that the East will rule at some point in the twenty-first century (pp. 615, 619). On a global scale he foresees two possible scenarios, one called 'Nightfall' – essentially the end of civilization (pp. 90–2) – and one called 'Singularity': 'A future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep ... that technology seems to be expanding at an infinite speed' (p. 592); it might even 'abolish' geography (p. 597). 'In the

end', so he claims, 'there is only one prediction we can rely on: neither Nightfall nor the Singularity will actually win the great race, because the race will have no finishing line' (p. 617). Not really much of an outcome, I would say, for a huge book dealing with 'the patterns of history and what they reveal about the future'. But history nevertheless provides lessons: with archaeology and television [*sic!*], it might save the world from disaster (p. 622). I simply do not believe – with good reason, I hope – that Morris actually found any clear patterns. I will not, therefore, discuss his scenarios and predictions: they are pure speculations, vague prophecies, or a combination of both.

Morris did not achieve his goals. To begin with this is because he is not entirely clear, when it comes to the point, what it is he wants to explain. In general terms the book is about development. As a matter of fact, however, Morris sometimes seems to be discussing why the West rules the world and sometimes why it is its wealthiest part. Both are questions considering 'capabilities to get things done' but they are not identical, and the connections between power and wealth are anything but unequivocal.

The author regards his book as a rebuttal of the thesis that Western primacy was predestined and inevitable. But who actually makes this claim? Even those who write about European 'exceptionalism' do not claim that it would *inevitably* have led to European primacy. When it comes to Morris' own, overall-shape-of-history perspective, I fail to see why one needs to go as far back as he does to find out why the West rules. To those reading the book primarily with that question in mind many chapters will be irrelevant. The approach Morris himself prefers is built around his theorem, which, unfortunately, does not inspire much confidence: were, for example, the main inventors and scientists who made Western industrialization possible actually driven by laziness, greed, or fear? What then is the contribution to history of people who, for example, are simply ambitious or creative?

Morris time and again writes that people in large groups are much the same, and that therefore historical change cannot be linked to a specific *kind* of people and their culture. That is quite beside the point. Differences between societies, their cultures, and – what really matters on the level of macro-history – their institutions are often substantial. Should we really believe that differences in the way people actually think, feel, and, most of all, regularly act, have no impact on the power and

wealth of their societies? That flies in the face of an enormous amount of scholarship. Morris' thesis, moreover, is based on a *non sequitur*. Even if, in sufficiently large groups, people are indeed all the same, clustering *certain* people in *certain* settings can definitely produce a 'non-average' outcome, as even Smith's simple example of pin-manufacturing shows. Economists do not agree on many things but most of them would agree that institutions do matter a lot.²

If differences in culture and institutions would, in the end, just be 'rational' responses to geography, Morris would still have a case. But can anyone sincerely defend such reductionism? The role of geography in history is important, but it should be subtly discussed not brutally claimed. Morris looks at historical processes in terms of challenges, possibilities, and responses, all based on geography, suggesting that necessity functions as the mother of invention, and that confronted with the same situation people will respond in the same way. In fact, the connection between 'challenge' and 'response' is much more complex. The Chinese and Japanese were definitely faced with the challenge of finding a solution for the drainage problems they were confronted with in their mines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet, in contrast to Britain, where people started experimenting with steam pumps, no (new) solution was found. Often it was not even looked for. Besides, neither 'challenges' nor 'responses' are 'objective facts'. Problems are,

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- 2 For the role of institutions in causing and sustaining economic growth, see e.g. D. Acemoglu, S. Johnson, and J. Robinson, 'Institutions as a fundamental cause of long-run growth', in P. Aghion and S. Durlauf, eds., *Handbook of economic growth*, vol. 1A, Amsterdam and London: Elsevier, 2005, pp. 385–472; Elhanan Helpman, *The mystery of economic growth*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); idem, ed., *Institutions and economic performance*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Mancur Olson, 'Big bills left on the sidewalk: why some nations are rich and others poor', in Mancur Olson and Satu Kähkönen, eds., *A not-so-dismal science: a broader view of economies and societies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, pp. 37–60); Dani Rodrik, Arvind Subramanian, and Francesco Trebbi, 'Institutions rule: the primacy of institutions over geography and integration in economic development', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 9, 2004, pp. 131–65.

to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder. Until the 1830s, the Chinese had largely ignored the presence of the British on their doorstep; they did not see a problem. When it comes to solutions, these are not 'objective' or unequivocal either, with each problem having 'its' solution. In the eighteenth century, the increasing scarcity of wood was addressed differently in China, Japan, and Britain. Such scarcity, moreover, is never simply a matter of geography. It depends on supply *and* demand. In Britain, for example, it was mostly a consequence of huge demand by the navy and the iron industry. In brief, geography itself is not a hard 'fact'.

Accordingly, Morris' view on technology and science is too 'mechanistic'. He interprets the rise of science in the West primarily as a consequence of the ways in which Western scholars were challenged by their environment to tackle particular problems, in particular practical concerns raised by the emergence of the Atlantic economy (p. 570; compare p. 500). In his view, that economy generated 'new challenges, stimulating the whole package of scientific thought, mechanical tinkering, and cheap power' (p. 502). This is very far-fetched, and, as a general statement, simply untenable. The oft-repeated claim that 'every time gets the thought it deserves' sounds hollow for economic history. For political history it is simply weird. Did the twentieth century 'deserve' Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Franco, Mao, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Ceaucescu, Kim Il Sung? According to Morris, 'Evolution selects for what we call common sense' (p. 566). If so, it apparently allows for quite some portentous exceptions.

It will not come as a surprise that Morris comes up with an explanation of the Great Divergence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries *à la Pomeranz*, claiming that it resides in the Atlantic economy and its ghost acreage in combination with coal and steam. If Asia had had an Atlantic economy – and coal – it would have had an industrial revolution too (pp. 502, 573). In his actual description of why Britain was first and the rest of the Western world followed suit, however, Morris takes a lot for granted that has nothing whatsoever to do with geography. About eighteenth-century Britain he writes: 'Britain was best placed of all. By 1770 Britain not only had higher wages, more coal, stronger finance, and arguably more open institutions ... than anyone else, but – thanks to coming out on top in its wars with the Dutch and French – it also had more colonies, trade, and warships' (p. 500). What is 'geographical' about all this?

More importantly, his comments on geography and resources might, at best, concern Britain alone, at the *beginning* of its industrialization. Many regions of the West that became rich were not integral parts of the Atlantic economy. Several regions that were, or had been, did not industrialize, or only did so quite late. What is the role of geography in early industrializing countries such as Belgium and Switzerland, or in countries that caught up, such as Germany, the USA, or Japan? What in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, or Austria? What in countries that did *not* take off, did so later, or with only partial success? Morris does not tell us.

There also is a fundamental problem with Morris's materialistic approach. Simply put, it can never fully explain the differences in wealth and power that it needs to explain. Let us again focus on wealth. In 2003, western Europeans were some sixteen times as rich per capita as they had been in 1820. In that year, they were *at best* twice as rich as Chinese per capita; in 1913 some six times, in 1950 some ten times, and in 1973 some fourteen times. It is only from the 1980s onwards that China has begun to catch up.³ Such growth and such diverging simply *cannot* be explained by sole reference to location and resources.

What Morris has to explain is not a windfall creating a sudden gap but a time-consuming, continuing process. To find out why 'the West rules' in terms of wealth, one has to study origins *and* logic of 'modern economic growth': that is, sustained and substantial growth fuelled by permanent innovation. Even if a certain resource portfolio predisposed a certain society for a certain path, this cannot suffice to explain why that path is actually taken and permanently 'improved'.

In the end we must conclude that Morris did not, in fact, find any patterns in history. He often makes quite firm, unequivocal claims. However, at times he is also quite nuanced: 'while geography drives social development, social development determines what geography means. It is a two-way street' (p. 30); '*falling* social development transformed geography too' (p. 332). Referring to the 'advantages of backwardness' he adds, without further specification, that 'not all backwardness is equal' (p. 34). Sometimes challenges are not real challenges or do

3 For these estimates, see Angus Maddison, *Contours of the world economy, 1–2030 AD: essays in macro-economic history*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 382.

not get an adequate response (see, for example, p. 375). At times he writes in terms of (near) necessity, certainty, and universal validity, at others in terms of probabilities. He is fond of saying that each time gets the thought it needs, but at times he only suspects or hopes that this might be the case (see pp. 595, 616, 621).

Apparently it all depends on the circumstances, as it always does in history. Morris' theory is like

historical materialism: in its strict version it is not true and in its relaxed version it is not informative. The overall goal of the book – to find patterns of history and foresee the future – is a pipe dream. To explain the global Great Divergence in development over the last two centuries – the 'minor' goal – one needs a much more analytical and focused approach than that presented here. This is not the way to do global history.