

## **Why the West Rules -- for Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal About the Future**

**Author:** Ian Morris, a professor at Stanford, is a British-born archaeologist, classicist and historian.

A New York Times Sunday Book Review described Morris as the “historian’s equivalent of those physicists who search for a still elusive unified field theory.” In this book, according to the reviewer, “he sets out to discover broad patterns, ‘the overall shape of history,’ by sifting through the world’s long development process.”

### **Asking why the West Rules Is Really a Question about Social Development**

Morris defines social development as “societies’ abilities to get things done – to shape their physical, economic, social and intellectual environments to their own ends.” Asking why the West rules, Morris argues, involves finding answers to two questions: (1) Why the West is more developed, i.e. more able to get things done than any other region of the world. And (2) Why Western development rose so high in the last two hundred years that for the first time in history a few countries could dominate the entire planet?

Most Western observers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Morris, took it for granted that social development is a good. This is a position that many of us in the development community have also taken for granted. But today, as Morris also points out, “many people feel that environmental degradation, wars, inequality, and disillusionment that social development brings in its train far outweighs any benefits it generates.”

### **Biology and Sociology Explain Most of the Shape of History**

This includes why social development has generally risen, why it rises faster at some times and slower at some times, and why it sometime fails.

These biological laws are constant, according to Morris, applying everywhere, in all times and all places. And, the East and the West have gone through the same stages of social development in the last fifteen thousand years and in the same order.

- Societies in the West and East have generated the same kind of history, because they have been peopled by the same kinds of human beings since fully modern humans began to spread out of Africa between roughly 60,000 and 12,000 years ago (see Figure 1.3).

*(Definitions: Morris describes the “West” as all the societies that have descended from westernmost (and earliest) of the Eurasian cores and the “East” as all those societies that have descended from the eastern most (and second oldest) of the Eurasian cores.)*

- The earliest civilizations in the West and East went through similar stages – for example, beginning to cultivate plants and moving later into full farming, moving into big villages and then towns, domesticating animals (see Table 2.1) – with civilizations in the West entering these stages earlier than those in the East (the exceptions being the development of simple pottery and the use of rich grave goods where the East led).
- *Sloth, fear and greed* are key to understanding the behavior of modern humans, according to Morris. “Change,” he argues, “is caused by lazy, greedy and frightened people looking for easier, more profitable and safer ways of doing things.” And, they rarely know what they are doing.

### **Maps (i.e. Geography) not Chaps Explain Regional Differences**

Biology and sociology, Morris argues, tell us about humanity as a whole, but not why people in one place have fared so differently to those in another. Biology and sociology explain the global similarities, in other words, while geography explains the regional differences in the timing and speed of social developments. This means that it is physical geography, not culture, religion, politics or great men that explains the Western domination of the world.

- Climate and climate change have given advantages to certain areas of the world, with areas with reliable rainfall able to benefit the most when agriculture was first invented, for example. This includes the “Lucky Latitudes” (see Figure 2.1) and the “Hilly Flanks” (see Figure 2.6).
- The greater availability of plants and animals that were more easily domesticated also gave certain areas an early advantage. This includes the Fertile Crescent, which was the first to develop agriculture, followed by China (in the Yellow-Yangzi Valleys). Development of Africa and the Americas started on the same path, but their development was delayed by thousands of years.
- Western civilizations also benefited from better/easier access to water-based trade routes – Europe and empires in Greece and Rome benefited from the Mediterranean, while the Chinese had to build their Grand Canal to facilitate trade between the two major parts of their empire. After the development of ocean-going ships, the significantly greater size of the Pacific Ocean (in comparison to the Atlantic Ocean) made transatlantic exploration and trade more feasible and profitable for Europe than trans-Pacific exploration and trade for East Asia (see Figure 8.10).

### **The Creation of a Social Development Index Helps Identify and Describe the Shape of History**

Morris constructed an Index of Social Development, which he describes as the “backbone” of the book, to help him organize and integrate the substantial body of facts that archeologists and historians have accumulated about these civilizations over the years. The Index, which makes a unique contribution to the subject of social development, does not, by itself, explain why the West rules, but it does help Morris identify and describe what he refers to as the shape of history.

This Index includes four separate indicators (1) the amount of energy a civilization can usefully capture, (2) its ability to organize, (measured by the size of its largest cities), (3) information technology (speed and reach of writing, printing, telecommunications, etc.) and (4) war-making capability (weapons, troop strength, logistics). Morris explains the evidence and statistical methods that he used to develop the Index in more detail in an Appendix on Social Development and in a separate book on *The Measure of Civilization*.

### **Using This Index to Discover and Describe the Patterns of the Past**

Morris uses this Social Development Index to produce a graph that traces the shape of history from 14,000BCE to 2,000CE (see Figures 3.3 and 3.8).

These figures show the West leading until the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, China leading until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and the West leading again in the modern era. In other words, the West, according to Morris' Index, has been the most developed region of the world for fourteen of the last fifteen millennia. But, the Index does not support the argument that the West's lead was locked in in the distant past, or that it is the result of a recent accident.

Morris also uses this Index to identify the major patterns in social developments that have occurred in both the West and East over this time period with Chapters 2 through 10 filled with historical evidence to support his conclusions:

- Civilizations throughout history waxed and waned, usually for reasons rulers were powerless to influence.
- A common pattern was for civilizations to climb the development ladder, only to crumble when they hit a "hard ceiling," usually inflicted by what Morris calls the "Five Horsemen of the Apocalypse" -- climate change, migration, famine, epidemics and state failure. "None of the great transformations in social development – the origins of agriculture, the rise of cities and states, the creation of different types of empires, the industrial revolution – was a matter of mere tinkering," according to Morris, "each was a result of desperate times calling for desperate measures."
- The failure of one civilization frequently has allowed another to rise up somewhere else (often on the periphery). This includes the Roman Empire, the Song Dynasty in China, Renaissance Europe, and the Britain of the Industrial Revolution which were energized by new technologies, social innovations or new organizing principles which pushed the whole process of development forward another notch.
- Geography drives social development, but social development can also determine what geography means. "Living on top of a coalfield meant very little two thousand years ago," as Morris points out, but two hundred years ago "tapping into coal drove social development up faster than ever before...."

## **What Comes Next and Its implications**

Morris's Social Development Index had already risen to 900 points by 2,000CE, and he predicts that the index will rise an additional 4,000 points in the next 100 years – progress that Morris describes as “staggering.”

Morris acknowledges in his last chapter that the patterns established in the past suggest that power and wealth will continue to shift from the West to the East (see Figures 10.11 and 11.1).

However, he is more worried about our common fate, arguing that the current competition between East and West is about to be disrupted by some powerful forces – nuclear proliferation, population growth, global epidemics, and climate change. We are, according to Morris, “approaching a new hard ceiling” and are facing a completely new kind of collective turning point, and “the next 40 years will be the most important in history.”