{essays in history}

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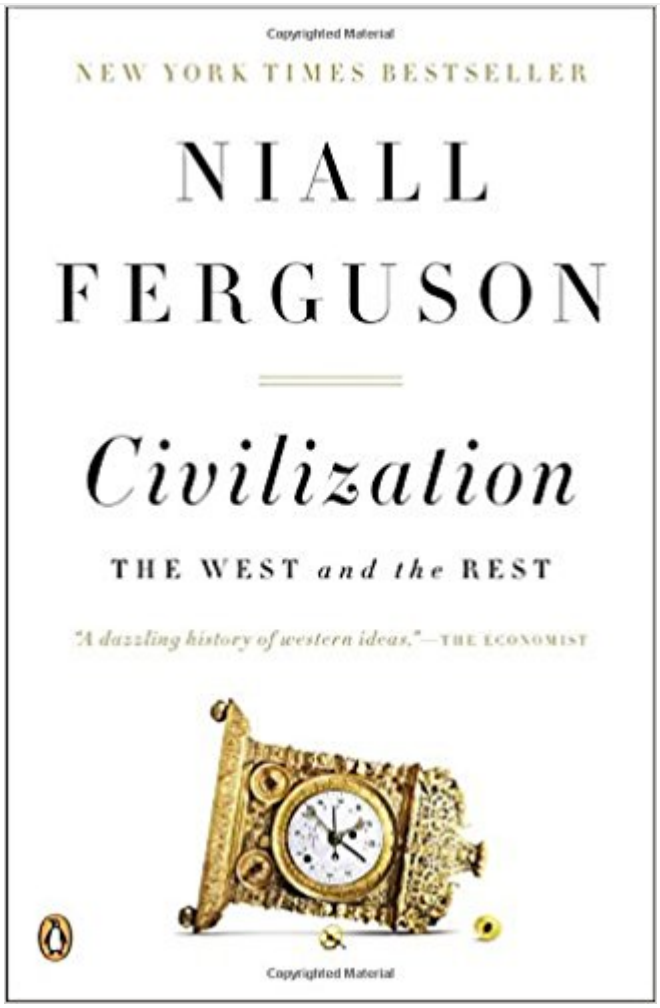
A Civilization Without Discontents



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Reviewed Work(s)

Civilization: The West and the Rest. By Niall Ferguson (New York: Penguin Press, 2011). Pp. 432. Cloth, $35.00.

Niall Ferguson is ubiquitous. Since earning his PhD at Oxford University two decades ago, he has solely authored nine books, published eight major refereed journal articles, written more than a dozen book chapters, penned an untold number of op-ed pieces for newspapers and magazines (i.e. *The Financial Times and Newsweek*) and produced several television documentaries to accompany his books – and that is the short list. In his most recent book, *Civilization: The West and The Rest* (2011), Ferguson sets out to uncover how and why the West came to dominate the world for the last five centuries for the purpose of shedding light on the prospects of continued Western ascendancy in an age of a historically resurgent China.(1) By positing six constituent elements of power to explain the dramatic rise of Europe onto the world stage, Ferguson presents an interpretive framework of the modern era that invites readers to critically assess his paradigm from the introduction to the conclusion.

In writing *Civilization*, Ferguson has joined an elite group of historians who have attempted to make sense of the dynamics of human societies across time and space over the last century. When William McNeill published *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* in 1963, it sparked a renaissance in the study of world history.(2) In more than eight hundred assiduously researched and insightfully analyzed pages, McNeill boldly challenged the prevailing view of established historians Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee that civilizations largely develop independently of one another.(3) From one chapter to the next, McNeill demonstrated how Western and Eastern civilizations frequently collided socially, economically and intellectually and developed to a significant degree from their interaction. At that time, an up-and-coming French historian, Fernand Braudel, was eight years into his seminal work *Civilization and Capitalism*.(4)

As a member of the Annales school of history, Braudel focused on the process of socio-economic change from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries from the perspective of the *longue duree* (long term). Rather than offering a chronological sweep of events, Braudel closely examined how capitalism remade societies through what nineteenth century political economist Karl Marx and twentieth century economist Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction." As capitalists built large-scale factories and invested and disinvested in various enterprises, people (workers) found themselves ever more subordinated to the economic system. Moreover, Braudel argued that the state had not historically served as an honest broker of interests but had acted to enhance the power of the owners of production at the expense of a preponderant number of people.

In 1996, Samuel P. Huntington entered the fray of world history by reviving the Spengler-Toynbee thesis in *The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of the World Order*.(5) Although not a work of history per se, Huntington used history to justify his contention that world politics in the post-Cold War era was divided across numerous and dangerously incompatible civilizations. How, for example, could radical Islamic nation-states (i.e. Iran) be reconciled to the West as their cultural values are seemingly diametrically opposed? As a result, Huntington fretted over the future course of history. Foreign policy hawks across the Atlantic and neoconservatives in the United States were quick to use Huntington to bolster their campaign for an assertive military presence around the globe to protect Western interests and prevent and/or manage the rise of states with values antithetical to Western standards.

In *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, Ferguson walks a fine line between the Spengler-Toynbee thesis of isolated development and McNeill's integrated view. While the West remains distinct in its achievements, Ferguson does credit other civilizations (i.e. China) as contributors to its rise to supremacy. First and foremost, Ferguson uses the book as a platform to refute Braudel and likeminded critics of capitalism. As *Civilization* is a dialogue with both significant currents of history and eminent historians of the past and present, this is history at its best – prodigious, profound and provocative.

As an unapologetic free-market conservative, Ferguson unsurprisingly places *competition* as the first building block of Western civilization. In

one of the most engrossing chapters in the book, the author recounts how the Celestial Kingdom was far superior to Europe in terms of technology and scholarly achievement in 1500 and seemed poised to extend its influence widely. While the Continent recovered slowly from the demographically-destructive Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century, Nanjing, which may have been the largest city in the world, was the global center of innovation and learning. From inventing paper money, gunpowder, the magnetic compass and chemical insecticide to producing scholars of unrivaled erudition, the Chinese clearly possessed the highest degree of civilization in the world. Quite suddenly, however, Nanjing became complacent and China was gripped by stasis. Why? Taking a page from Jared Diamond's groundbreaking thesis in *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*(1997), Ferguson believes competition between the fragmented polities of Europe spurred Continental innovation just as the homogenous and increasingly isolationistic elites in Nanjing squandered the potential of its peoples. (6) As China declined from wars and diseases in the early seventeenth century, Europeans were relentlessly exploring new lands and establishing lucrative trade routes. In accumulating capital and knowledge, the Continent ushered in an age of scientific inquiry to further its material progress.

Subsequent to *competition*, Ferguson delivers a balanced discussion on the role of *science* as the second key factor behind the rise of the West. While Europe was awakening to a new age by the twelfth century, it was far from being the leading civilization of its time. Prior to the First Crusade of the eleventh century, Muslim scholars were responsible for translating and reviving the classical works of Greece and Rome. Despite producing experts in cartography, medicine, mathematics, optics and philosophy, the Abbasid Caliphate, which had successfully made Baghdad the intellectual center of the world, fatefully began to shun science for a more dogmatic form of religiosity. Interestingly, Europe was moving in a diametrically opposite direction.

After largely clinging to an Augustinian primacy of faith for more than a thousand years, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a dramatic shift toward reason and applied knowledge in Europe. Beyond building on its longstanding traditions of innovative warfare, Europeans significantly extended the realm of knowledge of science and

government. As John Locke applied rational principles to the order of a just society in *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Thomas Hooke and Isaac Newton harnessed the new age of free inquiry to revolutionize microscopy and physics with their respective works *Micrographia*(1665) and *Principia* (1687). Due to the advent of movable type and a surge of translated material from Latin to vernacular languages (i.e. Luther's criticisms of the Church, the 'Ninety-Five Theses,' were written by Luther in Latin but translated into German and disseminated by printing presses), literacy expanded and Europe became home to the world's foremost scientific community.

Does *competition* alone, however, adequately account for Western progress in knowledge and science? Over his forty-six year reign of Prussia (r. 1740-1786), Frederick The Great underwrote the intellectual pursuits of two formidable philosophers, Immanuel Kant and Moses Mendelssohn, and established the Prussian Academy of Science and Letters. Shortly thereafter, other monarchs in Europe followed suit out of competition. Yet, was there not a large degree of public-private cooperation involved within this competition? Clearly, many of the intellectual advances made during these critical centuries resulted from state-sponsorship. Two scholarly studies in the field of technological history, *Harpers Ferry Armory and The New Technology* (1977) by Merritt Roe and *Paths of Innovation: Technological Change in Twentieth Century America* (1998) by David C. Mowery and Nathan Rosenberg, trenchantly demonstrate that private enterprises have been unable or unwilling to finance scientific endeavors due to the lengthy research/testing process involved and their uncertain outcomes.(7) Whether the Prussian king (the Prussian Academy), the English Monarch (the Royal Society) or the takeover of the armory at Harpers Ferry by the American government, the state has historically been the one most able to make the long-term investments necessary to sustain projects of enduring value. Rather than simply competition, strands of cooperation within a larger competitive framework may best define the Renaissance.

In 1840, French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon published *What is Property?: or An Inquiry to the Principle of Right and of Government*. In his essay, he famously answered the question posed in his title with three famous words – "Property is theft."(8) For Ferguson, property is not only *not* theft but the basis of liberty for a free society – the third

"mainspring" of Western power. As property-ownership was open to all free white males, British America originated as a stakeholder society whereby citizens were inclined to participate in republican form of government to protect their interests and shape the idea of a 'common good.' In comparison, Spanish America parceled out *encomiendas* (land tracts) through the early sixteenth century to pay off former soldiers and Crown officials for their services.

Unlike Britain, the Spanish monarchy had not been chastened by a noble revolt akin to the one at Runnymede in 1215 – which produced the Magna Carta. As the Spanish colonies had no republican traditions, land in the Spanish New World became increasingly concentrated into an oligarchic system. As a result, the owners of the *haciendas* (the large estates that replaced the more widely-distributed encomiendas) plundered the land and exploited its indigenous peoples even more ruthlessly than in North America. While true, Ferguson fails to mention that the Homestead Act of 1862, which offered free land to settlers of the American West, did not prevent a plutocratic concentration of wealth, power and resource-rich land from developing after the Civil War. In noting that the legal structure of the Spanish colonies broke down with the discovery of gold and doomed the rule of law, Ferguson could have (and perhaps should have) made the case that the American experiment was similarly derailed by the rise of John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie and other industrial titans – which spelled the corruption of American politics and the debasement of American ideals at the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter four, which is entitled *Medicine*, serves two purposes for the author. It not only contains paragraphs devoted to explaining how Western medicine defines the greatness of Western civilization by its fusion of science and humanism but it also has several pages dedicated to attacking the ideas espoused by Western thinkers critical of individualism and market-based economies. It is here that his bias stands out most in the book.

As for the development of medicine, Ferguson loudly lauds the work of Western doctors from Cuba to Cape Town in discovering and disseminating medicines across Asia and Africa for the benefit millions in less-developed countries. While true, Ferguson largely omits discussion of the egregious impact of Western imperialism and its

deleterious impact on the well-being of non-Western peoples. In Africa, for example, hundreds of villages were torn apart and millions of people suffered and died at the hands of a forced-labor regime for the production of rubber in King Leopold's Congo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This practice was repeated elsewhere on the Continent by several European nations in pursuit of raw power and sheer profit.(9) Ferguson rightly claims Western medicine made the most inroads to success in South Africa. Yet, some of that medicine would not have been needed had not Western mine owners forced Africans to work in the most sordid conditions imaginable – an environment that caused many of them to contract pneumonia and other serious illnesses.(10) In noting that numerous institutes of medicine have been set up in Africa by Western countries, Ferguson is again correct. At the same time, however, he ought to have qualified his argument by pointing out that much of that research and development has benefited the West instead of Africa itself. The inability of Africans to afford medicines produced by Western pharmaceutical companies in Africa has only recently been addressed and has not been fully resolved. If Ferguson presents an unevenly sanguine picture of Western medicine, he is equally zealous in delivering a scathing condemnation of any and all intellectuals hostile to the free-market individualism of Adam Smith.

While Jean-Jacque Rousseau is branded as a dangerous, anti-democratic ideologue, the French Revolution is cast as a largely irrational act of supreme violence in the tradition of Edmund Burke. Ferguson's conspicuous labeling of the Revolution of 1848 as "a revolution of the intellectuals" precisely echoes the view taken by Sir Lewis Namier in the World War II era as opposed to the more currently accepted socio-economic interpretation. In his first major book, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (1999), Ferguson directly and indirectly rebutted Fritz Fischer's thesis in *Germany's War Aims in the First World War* (1968) in which Germany was pinned as the principal aggressor and cause of the war.(11) Rather than a war begun by Kaiser Wilhelm II and fought by the Allies to contain his expansionist designs, World War I is conspicuously dubbed as "a war within Western Civilization" (p. 181) – implying the conflict was one of multiple causes with no one villain of the piece. Although not germane to the focus of the chapter, Ferguson's grand historiographical sweep of major events from 1789 to 1918 is thought-provoking.

For Ferguson, the development of life-saving medicines and their introduction throughout the vast British Empire was a powerful measure of human progress and a reflection of the highest values of Western Civilization. Almost incomprehensibly, people around the world in the early nineteenth century could expect to live less than thirty years on average. By 2001, global life expectancy reached nearly sixty-seven years. In prohibiting African witch-doctors from performing their services, creating institutions devoted to finding cures for tropical diseases and vaccinating populations to prevent deadly outbreaks, Europeans, according to Ferguson, increased the length and improved the quality of life for Africans prior to the end of the colonial era. As Europeans often died from contagions in their attempts to penetrate the interior, Western medicine, however, may have actually benefitted the colonizers more than the colonized peoples. Considering the plight of many Africans today in states devoid of modern medical infrastructure, Ferguson's inclusion of medicine as an intersection of science and Western empathy (i.e. Doctors without Borders) may indeed speak to the best Western Civilization has to offer the world.

Consumption, which constitutes Ferguson's fifth element of power, is given a large role in the ascendancy of the West. Echoing the late free-market economist Milton Friedman, Ferguson considers consumer choice as a variant of democracy whereby citizens vote on a daily basis for products to be made or discontinued. In what used to be called the 'Textile Revolution,' Britain and the United States turned their nations into garment-making workshops thereby producing an accompanying revolution of individual expression through fashion. Indeed, the arrival of the Singer sewing machine in the mid-nineteenth century, along with decreasing shipping costs, ushered in a new age of trade and wealth-creation. Yet Ferguson scarcely mentions that progress in the production of worldly goods often came at the price of exploited workers and ruinous environmental conditions. Did not Charles Dickens make his career out of writing novel after novel on the dark underside of the industrial revolution? Ferguson's claim that capitalists were aware of the role of their employees as consumers is certainly debatable. If true, why did many (if not most) large businesses depress wages and freely lay-off workers for long, seasonal stretches? Extended periods of unemployment or underemployment often contributed to underconsumption, overproduction and ultimately – recession.

Over the course of the chapter, Ferguson offers his most unconventional insight on the late twentieth century by contending that the Soviet Union would likely have emerged victorious had a thermonuclear war occurred during The Cold War. As both the USSR and the United States possessed the capacity to destroy each other many times over due to their large missile arsenals – which gave rise to the Cold War military doctrine of *Mutually Assured Destruction* (MAD), the idea of a winner in such a conflict has been seen as essentially moot by nearly all policymakers and intellectuals with the exception of a few extreme right-wing ideologues since the 1960s. Perhaps Ferguson, who has delved into counterfactual history throughout his career, is simply being academically provocative and offering an alternative view.

Competition, science, property, medicine, and consumption all emanate out of the author's final and most essential mainspring of Western power – *Work*. Whether or not Luther and Protestantism were directly responsible for inculcating the habit of working long hours and saving money, the Reformation unleashed individualism which in turn spurred literacy levels and created new opportunities for wealth. As religious worship and the celebrated Western work-ethic have both declined due to cultural changes over the past century, however, Ferguson contemplates the future prospects for Europe and America in a new millennium where China is set to displace the United States as the world's largest economy in only a few years. While the Middle Kingdom has revived its past achievements and glory by forging ahead with massive economic development and large-scale scientific and technical endeavors since 9/11 (2001), the United States has doubled its public federal debt due to financing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and bailing out several large financial institutions responsible for plunging the world economy into crisis in 2007.

Will China end the dominance enjoyed by the West for the past five hundred years? Although the United States will likely be unable to reclaim its number one economic status once surrendered, Ferguson ends by suggesting that the US and Europe will remain viable due to their commitments to maintaining tolerant and open societies. On this point, Ferguson is historically correct. Although the means are hotly contested, both conservatives and liberals widely agree that long-term growth can only be sustained by empowering both consumers and

producers. Whenever an autocrat or a ruling class denies citizens freedom of speech and authentic political participation, corruption becomes rife, and the workings of government and business are compromised. That is exactly what Beijing is grappling with today. As China's political elite has shown no signs of preparing the nation for a transition to democracy, its future, Ferguson seems to suggest, will not be devoid of difficulties.

When *Civilization* was published last year in Britain, several critics dismissed the book as "neo-liberal" and "Eurocentric." While Ferguson avidly defends private enterprise and the multifaceted contributions of Europe throughout his study, however, he never proclaims Europe as the sole author of civilization. In fact, many chapters are filled with lines lauding other civilizations – including high praise for the innovations of China through the Ming Dynasty and sincere plaudits for the scholarly achievements of the Islamic Golden Age from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries. Rather than the inventor of a dominant civilization, it was the mark of European genius to not only produce original ideas and technological advancements but to also incorporate the achievements of other civilizations into its framework. As Ferguson devotes significant passages to the slave trade and Europe's exploitation of indigenous peoples of the New World, his latest book cannot justly be written off as a selectively biased account of European greatness.

The study of world history is a burgeoning field in academe. Over the past two decades, several major universities have developed programs and hired prestigious faculty members for the purpose of joining a scholarly community devoted to making a serious inquiry into the social and economic trends of the past. In *Civilization*, Niall Ferguson has given us a highly readable and sharply argued work of true erudition. Historians and general readers alike will undoubtedly question both his choices for the six "mainsprings of power" and his interpretations of events – as they are the product of an Oxford-trained academic who clearly absorbed much of the Cold War rhetoric of the Reagan-Thatcher era on the superiority of Western civilization. Is not the free and diplomatic questioning of any body of knowledge what truly civilized people do?

Jeff Roquen

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1. Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and The Rest*(New York: Penguin Press, 2011).
2. William McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) Originally published, 1963.
3. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*(New York: Knopf, 1926); Arnold Toynbee, *The Study of History* 12 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).
4. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) Originally published in French, 1955-1979.
5. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of the World Order*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
6. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*(New York: WW Norton, 1997).
7. Merritt Roe, *Harpers Ferry Armory and The New Technology: The Challenge of Change*(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); David C. Mowery and Nathan Rosenberg, *Paths of Innovation: Technological Change in 20th-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
8. J. Proudhon, *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle and of Government*(Princeton, MA: B.R. Tucker, 1876).
9. James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*(Raleigh, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 185.
10. Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann, *The United States and Africa: A History*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 190-191.
11. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*(New York: Basic Books, 1999); Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in The First World War* (New York: WW Norton, 1967).

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