WHY THE WEST RULES—FOR NOW

The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future

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For Kathy

INTRODUCTION

ALBERT IN BEIJING

London, April 3, 1848. Queen Victoria's head hurt. She had been kneeling with her face pressed to the wooden pier for twenty minutes. She was angry, frightened, and tired from fighting back tears; and now it had started raining. The drizzle was soaking her dress, and she only hoped that no one would mistake her shivers for fear.

Her husband was right next to her. If she just stretched out her arm, she could rest a hand on his shoulder, or smooth his wet hair—anything to give him strength for what was coming. If only time would stand still—or speed up. If only she and Prince Albert were anywhere but here.

And so they waited—Victoria, Albert, the Duke of Wellington, and half the court—on their knees in the rain. Clearly there was a problem on the river. The Chinese armada's flagship was too big to put in at the East India Docks, so Governor Qiying was making his grand entry to London from a smaller armored steamer named after himself, but even the *Qiying* was uncomfortably large for the docks at Blackwall. Half a dozen tugs were towing her in, with great confusion all around. Qiying was not amused.

Out of the corner of her eye Victoria could see the little Chinese band on the pier. Their silk robes and funny hats had looked splendid an hour ago, but were now thoroughly bedraggled in the English rain. Four times the band had struck up some Oriental cacophony, thinking that Qiying's litter was about to be carried ashore, and four times had given up. The fifth time, though, they stuck to it. Victoria's stomach lurched. Qiying must be ashore at last. It was really happening.

And then Qiying's envoy was right in front of them, so close that Victoria could see the stitching on his slippers. There were little dragons, puffing smoke and flames. It was much finer work than her own ladies-in-waiting seemed able to do.

The envoy droned on, reading the official proclamation from Beijing. Victoria had been told what it said: that the Grand Exemplar the Cultured Emperor Daoguang recognized the British queen's desire to pay her respects to the imperial suzerainty; that Victoria had begged for the opportunity to offer tribute and taxes, paying the utmost obeisance and asking for commands; and that the emperor agreed to treat her realm as one of his inferior domains, and to allow the British to follow the Chinese way.

But everyone in Britain knew what had really happened. At first the Chinese had been welcome. They had helped fund the war against Napoleon, who had closed the continent's ports to them. But since 1815 they had been selling their goods at lower and lower prices in Britain's ports, until they put Lancashire's cotton mills out of business. When the British protested and raised tariffs, the Chinese burned the proud Royal Navy, killed Admiral Nelson, and sacked every town along the south coast. For almost eight centuries England had defied all conquerors, but now Victoria's name would go down forever in the annals of shame. Her reign had been an orgy of murder, rapine, and kidnapping; defeat, dishonor, and death. And here was Qiying himself, the evil architect of Emperor Daoguang's will, come to ooze more cant and hypocrisy.

At the appropriate moment Victoria's translator, kneeling just behind her, gave a perfect courtier's cough that only the queen could hear. This was the signal: Qiying's minion had reached the part about investing her as a subject ruler. Victoria raised her forehead from the dock and sat up to receive the barbaric cap and robe that signified her nation's dishonor. She got her first good look at Qiying. She did not

expect to see such an intelligent- and vigorous-looking middle-aged fellow. Could he really be the monster she had dreaded? And Qiying got his first look at Victoria. He had seen a portrait of her at her coronation, but she was even stouter and plainer than he had expected. And young—very, very young. She was soaked and appeared to have little splinters and bits of mud from the dock all over her face. She did not even know how to kowtow properly. What graceless people!

And now came the moment of blackest horror, the unthinkable. With deep bows, two mandarins stepped from behind Qiying and helped Albert to his feet. Victoria knew she should make no sound or gesture—and in very truth, she was frozen to the spot, and could not have protested had she tried.

They led Albert away. He moved slowly, with great dignity, then stopped and looked back at Victoria. The world was in that glance.

Victoria swooned. A Chinese attendant caught her before she fell to the dock; it would not do to have a queen, even a foreign devil queen, hurt herself at such a moment. Sleepwalking now, his expression frozen and his breath coming in gasps, Albert left his adopted country. Up the gangplank, into the luxurious locked cabin, and on to China, there to be invested as a vassal in the Forbidden City by the emperor himself.

By the time Victoria recovered, Albert was gone. Now, finally, great sobs racked her body. It could take Albert half a year to get to Beijing, and the same to get back; and he might wait further months or years among those barbarians until the emperor granted him an audience. What would she do? How could she protect her people, alone? How could she face this wicked Qiying, after what he had done to them?

Albert never came back. He reached Beijing, where he astonished the court with his fluent Chinese and his knowledge of the Confucian classics. But on his heels came news that landless farm workers had risen up and were smashing threshing machines all over southern England; and then that bloody street battles were raging in half the capitals of Europe. A few days later the emperor received a letter from Qiying suggesting that it might be best to keep a talented prince like Albert safely out of the country. All this violence was as much about the painful transition to modernity as about the Chinese Empire, but there was no point taking chances with such turbulent people.

So Albert stayed in the Forbidden City. He threw away his English suits and grew a Manchu pigtail, and with each passing year his knowledge of the Chinese classics deepened. He grew old, alone among the pagodas, and after thirteen years in the gilded cage, he finally just gave up living.

On the other side of the world Victoria shut herself away in underheated private rooms at Buckingham Palace and ignored her colonial masters. Qiying simply ran Britain without her. Plenty of the so-called politicians would crawl on their bellies to do business with him. There was no state funeral when Victoria died in 1901; just shrugs and wry smiles at the passing of the last relic of the age before the Chinese Empire.

LOOTY IN BALMORAL

In reality, of course, things didn't happen this way. Or at least, only some of them did. There really was a Chinese ship called the *Qiying*, and it really did sail into London's East India Docks in April 1848 (Figure I.1). But it was not an ironclad gunboat carrying a Chinese governor to London: the real *Qiying* was just a gaily painted wooden junk. British businessmen in the Crown Colony of Hong Kong had bought the little boat a couple of years before and decided that it would be a jolly jape to send it back to the old country.

Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and the Duke of Wellington really did come down to the river, but not to kowtow before their new master. Rather, they came as tourists to gawk at the first Chinese ship ever seen in Britain.

The ship really was named after the governor of Guangzhou. But Qiying had not accepted British submission in 1842 after destroying the Royal Navy. In reality, he negotiated China's surrender that same year, after a small British squadron sank every war junk it could find, silenced the coastal batteries, and closed the Grand Canal linking Beijing to the rice-rich Yangzi Valley, threatening the capital with starvation.

And Emperor Daoguang really did rule China in 1848. But Daoguang did not tear Victoria and Albert apart: in fact the royal couple lived on in bliss, punctuated by Victoria's moods, until Albert died in 1861. The reality was that Victoria and Albert tore Daoguang apart.

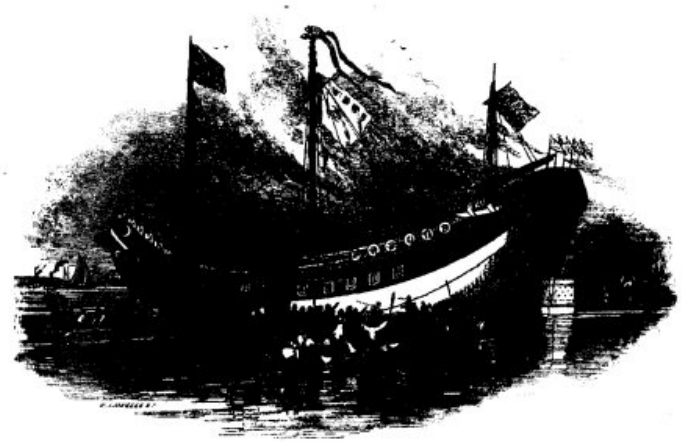

Figure I.1. The real *Qiying*: boatloads of Londoners row out to see the ship in 1848, as recorded by an artist from the *Illustrated London News*.

History is often stranger than fiction. Victoria's countrymen broke Daoguang and shattered his empire for that most British of vices—a cup of tea (or, to be precise, several billion cups of tea). In the 1790s the British East India Company, which ran much of South Asia as a private fiefdom, was shipping 23 million pounds of Chinese tea leaves to London every year. The profits were enormous, but there was one problem: the Chinese government was not interested in importing British manufactured goods in return. All it wanted was silver, and the company was having trouble raising enough to keep the trade going. So there was much joy when the traders realized that whatever the Chinese government might want, the Chinese people wanted something else: opium. And the best opium grew in India, which the company controlled. At Guangzhou—the one Chinese port where foreigners could trade—merchants sold opium for silver, used the silver to buy tea, then sold the tea for even greater profits back in London.

As so often in business, though, solving one problem just created another. Indians ate opium and Britons dissolved it and drank it, consuming ten to twenty tons every year (some of it going to calm babies). Both techniques produced mildly narcotic effects, enough to inspire the odd poet and stimulate a few earls and dukes to new debaucheries,

but nothing to worry about. The Chinese, on the other hand, smoked it. The difference was not unlike that between chewing coca leaves and lighting up a crack pipe. British drug dealers contrived to overlook this difference but Daoguang did not, and in 1839 declared war on drugs.

It was an odd war, which quickly degenerated into a personal face-off between Daoguang's drug czar, Commissioner Lin Zexu, and the British superintendent of trade at Guangzhou, Captain Charles Elliot. When Elliot realized he was losing, he persuaded the traders to surrender a staggering seventeen hundred tons of opium to Lin; and he got the traders to agree to this by guaranteeing that the British government would reimburse them for their losses. The merchants did not know if Elliot actually had the authority to promise this, but they grabbed the offer all the same. Lin got his opium; Elliot saved face and kept the tea trade moving; and the merchants got top price (plus interest and shipping) for their drugs. Everyone won.

Everyone, that is, except Lord Melbourne, Britain's prime minister. Melbourne, who was expected to find £2 million to compensate the drug dealers, did *not* win. It should have been madness for a mere naval captain to put a prime minister on the spot like this, but Elliot knew he could rely on the business community to lobby Parliament to recover the money. And so it was that personal, political, and financial interests thickened around Melbourne until he had no choice but to pay up and then send an expedition to make the Chinese government reimburse Britain for the confiscated opium (Figure I.2).

This was not the British Empire's finest hour. Contemporary analogies are never precise, but it was rather as if in response to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency making a major bust, the Tijuana cartel prevailed on the Mexican government to shoot its way into San Diego, demanding that the White House reimburse the drug lords for the street value of the confiscated cocaine (plus interest and carriage charges) as well as paying the costs of the military expedition. Imagine, too, that while it was in the neighborhood, a Mexican fleet seized Catalina Island as a base for future operations and threatened to blockade Washington until Congress gave the Tijuana drug lords monopoly rights in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York.

The difference, of course, is that Mexico is in no position to bombard San Diego, while in 1839 Britain could do whatever it wanted.

Figure I.2. Not their finest hour: British ships blowing Chinese war junks out of the Yangzi River in 1842. At the far right the *Nemesis*, the world's first all-iron warship, is living up to its name.

British ships brushed aside China's defenses and Qiying signed a humiliating treaty, opening China to trade and missionaries. Daoguang's wives were not carried off to London, the way Albert went to Beijing in the scene I imagined at the beginning of this introduction, but the "Opium War" broke Daoguang all the same. He had let down 300 million subjects and betrayed two thousand years of tradition. He was right to feel like a failure. China was coming apart. Addiction soared, the state lost control, and custom crumbled.

Into this uncertain world came a failed civil service candidate named Hong Xiuquan, who had grown up just outside Guangzhou. Four times Hong had trekked to the city to take the arduous civil service entrance exams; four times he had flunked. Finally, in 1843, he collapsed and had to be carried back to his village. In his fevered dreams, angels took him up to heaven. There he met a man who, he was told, was his elder brother, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder the two of them battled demons under their bearded father's gaze.

No one in the village could make sense of this dream, and Hong seemed to forget about it for several years, until one day he opened a little book he had been given in Guangzhou on one of his trips to the

examination hall. It summarized the Christians' sacred texts—and, Hong realized, held the key to his dream. The brother in his dream was obviously Jesus, which made Hong God's Chinese son. He and Jesus had chased the demons out of heaven, but the dream seemed to mean that God wanted Hong to expel them from earth, too. Patching together a mix of evangelical Christianity and Confucianism, Hong proclaimed a Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. Angry peasants and bandits flocked to his banner. By 1850 his motley crew was defeating the disorganized imperial armies sent against him, and he followed God's will by introducing radical social reforms. He redistributed land, legislated equal rights for women, and even banned footbinding.

In the early 1860s, while Americans slaughtered each other with artillery and repeating rifles in the world's first modern war, the Chinese were doing the same with cutlasses and pikes in the world's last traditional war. For sheer horror, the traditional version far outdid the modern one. Twenty million died, mostly through starvation and disease, and Western diplomats and generals exploited the chaos to push farther into East Asia. In 1854, looking for coaling stations between California and China, the American Commodore Perry forced Japan's ports open. In 1858 Britain, France, and the United States won new concessions from China. Emperor Xianfeng, who understandably hated the foreign devils who had destroyed his father, Daoguang, and were now exploiting his war against Hong, tried to wriggle out of the new treaty, but when Xianfeng got difficult, the British and French governments made him an offer he couldn't refuse. They marched on Beijing and Xianfeng beat an undignified retreat to a nearby vacation spot. The Europeans then burned his beautiful Summer Palace, letting him know they could do the same to the Forbidden City if they felt like it, and Xianfeng caved in. Shattered even more badly than his father had been, he refused to leave his hiding place or meet with officials ever again, and retreated into drugs and sex. He died a year later.

Prince Albert expired just a few months after Xianfeng. Despite spending years campaigning to persuade the British government that poor drains spread disease, Albert probably died from typhoid carried through Windsor Castle's wretched sewers. Sadder still, Victoria—as deeply enamored of modern plumbing as Albert—was in the bathroom when he passed away.

Robbed of the love of her life, Victoria sank deeper into moods and melancholy. But she was not completely alone. British officers presented her with one of the finest curiosities they had looted from the Summer Palace at Beijing: a Pekinese dog. She named him Looty.

LOCKING IN

Why did history follow the path that took Looty to Balmoral Castle, there to grow old with Victoria, rather than the one that took Albert to study Confucius in Beijing? Why did British boats shoot their way up the Yangzi in 1842, rather than Chinese ones up the Thames? To put it bluntly: Why does the West rule?

To say the West "rules" might sound a little strong; after all, however we define "the West" (a question I will return to in a few pages), Westerners have not exactly been running a world government since the 1840s, and regularly fail to get their own way. Many of us are old enough to remember America's ignominious scramble out of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1975 and the way Japanese factories drove Western rivals out of business in the 1980s. Even more of us now have the sense that everything we buy is made in China. Yet it is also obvious that in the last hundred years or so Westerners have shipped armies to Asia, not the other way around. East Asian governments have struggled with Western capitalist and Communist theories, but no Western governments have tried to rule on Confucian or Daoist lines. Easterners often communicate across linguistic barriers in English; Europeans rarely do so in Mandarin or Japanese. As a Malaysian lawyer bluntly told the British journalist Martin Jacques, "I am wearing your clothes, I speak your language, I watch your films, and today is whatever date it is because you say so."

The list could go on. Since Victoria's men carried off Looty the West has maintained a global dominance without parallel in history.

My goal is to explain this.

At first glance, it might not look like I have set myself a very difficult task. Nearly everyone agrees that the West rules because the industrial revolution happened there, not in the East. In the eighteenth century British entrepreneurs unleashed the energies of steam and coal.

Factories, railroads, and gunboats gave nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans the ability to project power globally; airplanes, computers, and nuclear weapons allowed their twentieth-century successors to cement this dominance.

This did not mean that everything had to turn out exactly as it did, of course. If Captain Elliot had not forced Lord Melbourne's hand in 1839, the British might not have attacked China that year; if Commissioner Lin had paid more attention to coastal defenses, the British might not have succeeded so easily. But it does mean that irrespective of when matters came to a head and of who sat on the thrones, won the elections, or led the armies, the West was always going to win in the nineteenth century. The British poet and politician Hilaire Belloc summed it up nicely in 1898:

Whatever happens we have got
The Maxim Gun, and they have not.

End of story.

Except, of course, this is not the end of the story. It just prompts a new question: *Why* had the West got the Maxim gun when the rest had not? This is the first question I address, because the answer tells us why the West rules today; and, armed with the answer, we can pose a second question. One of the reasons people care about why the West rules is that they want to know whether, how long, and in what ways this will continue—that is, what will happen next.

This question grew increasingly pressing as the twentieth century wore on and Japan emerged as a major power; and in the early twenty-first it has become unavoidable. China's economy doubles in size every half-dozen years and will probably be the world's largest before 2030. As I write, in early 2010, most economists are looking to China, not the United States or Europe, to restart the world's economic engine. China hosted spectacular Olympic Games in 2008 and two Chinese "taikonauts" have taken spacewalks. China and North Korea both have nuclear weapons, and Western strategists worry about how the United States will accommodate itself to China's rising power. How long the West will stay on top is a burning question.

Professional historians are famously bad prophets, to the point that most refuse to talk about the future at all. The more I have thought

about why the West rules, though, the more I have realized that the part-time historian Winston Churchill understood things better than most professionals. "The farther backward you can look," Churchill insisted, "the farther forward you are likely to see." Following in this spirit (even if Churchill might not have liked my answers), I will suggest that knowing why the West rules gives us a pretty good sense of how things will turn out in the twenty-first century.

I am not, of course, the first person to speculate on why the West rules. The question is a good 250 years old. Before the eighteenth century the question rarely came up, because it frankly did not then make much sense. When European intellectuals first started thinking seriously about China, in the seventeenth century, most felt humbled by the East's antiquity and sophistication; and rightly so, said the few Easterners who paid the West any heed. Some Chinese officials admired Westerners' ingenious clocks, devilish cannons, and accurate calendars, but they saw little worth emulating in these otherwise unimpressive foreigners. If China's eighteenth-century emperors had known that French philosophers such as Voltaire were writing poems praising them, they would probably have thought that that was exactly what French philosophers ought to be doing.

Yet from almost the first moment factories filled England's skies with smoke, European intellectuals realized that they had a problem. As problems went, it was not a bad one: they appeared to be taking over the world, but did not know why.

Europe's revolutionaries, reactionaries, romantics, and realists went into a frenzy of speculation on why the West was taking over, producing a bewildering mass of hunches and theories. The best way to begin asking why the West rules may be by separating these into two broad schools of thought, which I will call the "long-term lock-in" and "short-term accident" theories. Needless to say, not every idea fits neatly into one camp or the other, but this division is still a useful way to focus things.

The unifying idea behind long-term lock-in theories is that from time immemorial some critical factor made East and West massively and unalterably different, and determined that the industrial revolution would happen in the West. Long-termers disagree—fiercely—on what that factor was and when it began to operate. Some emphasize material forces, such as climate, topography, or natural resources; others point

to less tangible matters, such as culture, politics, or religion. Those who favor material forces tend to see "the long term" as being very long indeed. Some look back fifteen thousand years to the end of the Ice Age; a few go back even further. Those who emphasize culture usually see the long term as being a bit shorter, stretching back just one thousand years to the Middle Ages or two and a half thousand to the age of the Greek thinker Socrates and China's great sage Confucius. But the one thing long-termers can agree on is that the Britons who shot their way into Shanghai in the 1840s and the Americans who forced Japan's harbors open a decade later were merely the unconscious agents of a chain of events that had been set in motion millennia earlier. A long-termer would say that by beginning this book with a contrast between Albert-in-Beijing and Looty-in-Balmoral scenarios, I was just being silly. Queen Victoria was always going to win: the result was inevitable. It had been locked in for generations beyond count.

Between roughly 1750 and 1950 nearly all explanations for why the West ruled were variations on the long-term lock-in theme. The most popular version was that Europeans were simply culturally superior to everyone else. Since the dying days of the Roman Empire most Europeans had identified themselves first and foremost as Christians, tracing their roots back to the New Testament, but in trying to explain why the West was now coming to rule, some eighteenth-century intellectuals imagined an alternative line of descent for themselves. Two and a half thousand years ago, they argued, the ancient Greeks created a unique culture of reason, inventiveness, and freedom. This set Europe on a different (better) trajectory than the rest of the world. The East had its learning too, they conceded, but its traditions were too muddled, too conservative, and too hierarchical to compete with Western thought. Many Europeans concluded that they were conquering everyone else because culture made them do it.

By 1900 Eastern intellectuals, struggling to come to terms with the West's economic and military superiority, often bought into this theory, though with a twist. Within twenty years of Commodore Perry's arrival in Tokyo Bay a "Civilization and Enlightenment" movement was translating the classics of the French Enlightenment and British liberalism into Japanese and advocating catching up with the West through democracy, industrialism, and the emancipation of women. Some even wanted to make English be the national language. The

problem, intellectuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi insisted in the 1870s, was long-term: China had been the source of much of Japan's culture, and China had gone terribly wrong in the distant past. As a result, Japan was only "semicivilized." But while the problem was long-term, Fukuzawa argued, it was not locked in. By rejecting China, Japan could become fully civilized.

Chinese intellectuals, by contrast, had no one to reject but themselves. In the 1860s a "Self-Strengthening" movement argued that Chinese traditions remained fundamentally sound; China just needed to build a few steamships and buy some foreign guns. This, it turned out, was mistaken. In 1895 a modernized Japanese army surprised a Chinese fortress with a daring march, seized its foreign-made guns, and turned them on China's steamships. The problem clearly went deeper than having the right weapons. By 1900 Chinese intellectuals were following the Japanese lead, translating Western books on evolution and economics. Like Fukuzawa, they concluded that Western rule was long-term but not locked in; by rejecting its own past China could catch up too.

But some Western long-termers thought there was simply nothing the East could do. Culture made the West best, they claimed, but was not the ultimate explanation for Western rule, because culture itself had material causes. Some believed that the East was too hot or too diseased for people to develop a culture as innovative as the West's; or perhaps there were just too many bodies in the East—consuming all the surplus, keeping living standards low, and preventing anything like the liberal, forward-looking Western society from emerging.

Long-term lock-in theories come in every political coloring, but Karl Marx's version has been the most important and influential. In the very days that British troops were liberating Looty, Marx—then writing a China column for the *New York Daily Tribune*—suggested that politics was the real factor that had locked in Western rule. For thousands of years, he claimed, Oriental states had been so centralized and so powerful that they had basically stopped the flow of history. Europe progressed from antiquity through feudalism to capitalism, and proletarian revolutions were about to usher in communism, but the East was sealed in the amber of despotism and could not share in the progressive Western trajectory. When history did not turn out exactly as Marx had predicted, later Communists (especially Lenin and his followers)

improved on his theories by claiming that a revolutionary vanguard might shock the East out of its ancient slumber. But that would only happen, Leninists insisted, if they could shatter the old, fossilized society—at whatever cost. This long-term lock-in theory is not the only reason why Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and the Kims of North Korea unleashed such horrors on their people, but it bears a heavy burden of responsibility.

Right through the twentieth century a complicated dance went on in the West as historians uncovered facts that did not seem to fit the long-term lock-in stories, and long-termers adjusted their theories to accommodate them. For instance, no one now disputes that when Europe's great age of maritime discovery was just beginning, Chinese navigation was far more advanced and Chinese sailors already knew the coasts of India, Arabia, East Africa, and perhaps Australia.* When the eunuch admiral Zheng He sailed from Nanjing for Sri Lanka in 1405 he led nearly three hundred vessels. There were tankers carrying drinking water and huge "Treasure Ships" with advanced rudders, watertight compartments, and elaborate signaling devices. Among his 27,000 sailors were 180 doctors and pharmacists. By contrast, when Christopher Columbus sailed from Cadiz in 1492, he led just ninety men in three ships. His biggest hull displaced barely one-thirtieth as much water as Zheng's; at eighty-five feet long it was shorter than Zheng's mainmast, and barely twice as long as his rudder. Columbus had no freshwater tankers and no real doctors. Zheng had magnetic compasses and knew enough about the Indian Ocean to fill a twenty-one-foot-long sea chart; Columbus rarely knew where he was, let alone where he was going.

*Some people think Chinese sailors even reached the Americas in the fifteenth century, but, as I will try to show in Chapter 8, these claims are probably fanciful. The closest thing to evidence for these imaginary voyages is a map of the world exhibited in Beijing and London in 2006, purporting to be a 1763 copy of a Chinese original drawn in 1418. The map is not only wildly different from all genuine fifteenth-century Chinese maps but is also strikingly like eighteenth-century French world maps, down to details like showing California as an island. Most likely an eighteenth-century Chinese cartographer combined fifteenth-century maps with newly available French maps. The mapmaker probably had no intention of deceiving anyone, but twenty-first-century collectors, eager for sensational discoveries, have happily deceived themselves.

This might give pause to anyone assuming that Western dominance was locked in in the distant past, but several important books have argued that Zheng He does, after all, fit into long-term lock-in theories: we just need more sophisticated versions. For example, in his magnificent book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, the economist David Landes renews the idea that disease and demography always gave Europe a decisive edge over China, but adds a new twist by suggesting that dense population favored centralized government in China and reduced rulers' incentives to exploit Zheng's voyages. Because they had no rivals, most Chinese emperors worried more about how trade might enrich undesirable groups like merchants than they did about getting more riches for themselves; and because the state was so powerful, they could stamp out this alarming practice. In the 1430s they banned oceanic voyages, and in the 1470s perhaps destroyed Zheng's records, ending the great age of Chinese exploration.

The biologist and geographer Jared Diamond makes a similar case in his classic *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. His main goal is to explain why it was societies within the band of latitude that runs from China to the Mediterranean Sea that developed the first civilizations, but he also suggests that Europe rather than China came to dominate the modern world because Europe's peninsulas made it easy for small kingdoms to hold out against would-be conquerors, favoring political fragmentation, while China's rounder coastline favored centralized rulers over petty princes. The resulting political unity allowed fifteenth-century Chinese emperors to ban voyages like Zheng's.

In fragmented Europe, by contrast, monarch after monarch could reject Columbus's crazy proposal, but he could always find someone else to ask. We might speculate that if Zheng had had as many options as Columbus, Hernán Cortés might have met a Chinese governor in Mexico in 1519, not the doomed Montezuma. But according to long-term lock-in theories, vast impersonal forces such as disease, demography, and geography ruled that possibility out.

Lately, though, Zheng's voyages and plenty of other facts have started striking some people as just too awkward to fit into long-term models at all. Already in 1905 Japan showed that Eastern nations could give Europeans a run for their money on the battlefield, defeating the Russian Empire. In 1942 Japan almost swept the Western powers out of the Pacific altogether, then, bouncing back from a shattering defeat in 1945,

changed direction to become an economic giant. Since 1978 China, as we all know, has moved along a similar path. In 2006 China beat out the United States as the world's biggest carbon emitter, and even in the darkest days of the 2008–2009 financial crisis, China's economy kept growing at rates that Western governments would envy in the best of years. Maybe we need to throw out the old question and ask a new one: not *why* the West rules, but *whether* the West rules. If the answer is no, then long-term lock-in theories that seek ancient explanations for a Western rule that does not actually exist seem rather pointless.

One result of these uncertainties has been that some Western historians have developed a whole new theory explaining why the West used to rule but is now ceasing to do so. I call this the short-term accident model. Short-term arguments tend to be more complicated than long-term ones, and there are fierce disagreements within this camp. But there is one thing short-termers do all agree on: pretty much everything long-termers say is wrong. The West has not been locked into global dominance since the distant past; only after 1800 CE, on the eve of the Opium War, did the West pull temporarily ahead of the East, and even that was largely accidental. The Albert-in-Beijing scenario is anything but silly. It could easily have happened.

LUCKING OUT

Orange County in California is better known for conservative politics, manicured palm trees, and long-time resident John Wayne (the local airport is named after him, despite his dislike of planes flying over the golf course) than for radical scholarship, but in the 1990s it became the epicenter of short-term accident theories of global history. Two historians (Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz) and a sociologist (Wang Feng) at the University of California's Irvine campus* wrote landmark books arguing that whatever we look at—ecology or family structures, technology and industry or finance and institutions, standards of living

*Wong left Irvine in 2005, but moved only forty miles, to the University of California's Los Angeles campus; and Wang had a co-author, James Lee, but he, too, teaches just forty miles from Irvine, at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

or consumer tastes—the similarities between East and West vastly outweighed the differences as late as the nineteenth century.

If they are right, it suddenly becomes much harder to explain why Looty came to London rather than Albert heading east. Some short-termers, like the maverick economist Andre Gunder Frank (who wrote more than thirty books on everything from prehistory to Latin American finance), argue that the East was actually better placed to have an industrial revolution than the West until accidents intervened. Europe, Frank concluded, was simply "a distant marginal peninsula" in a "Sino-centric world order." Desperate to get access to the markets of Asia, where the real wealth was, Europeans a thousand years ago tried to batter their way through the Middle East in the Crusades. When this did not work some, like Columbus, tried sailing west to reach Cathay.

That failed too, because America was in the way, but in Frank's opinion Columbus's blunder marked the beginning of the change in Europe's place in the world system. In the sixteenth century China's economy was booming but faced constant silver shortages. America was full of silver; so Europeans responded to China's needs by getting Native Americans to claw a good 150,000 tons of precious metal out of the mountains of Peru and Mexico. A third of it ended up in China. Silver, savagery, and slavery bought the West "a third-class seat on the Asian economic train," as Frank put it, but still more needed to happen before the West could "displace Asians from the locomotive."

Frank thought that the rise of the West ultimately owed less to European initiative than to a "decline of the East" after 1750. This began, he believed, when the silver supply started shrinking. This set off political crises in Asia but provided a bracing stimulus in Europe, where, as they ran out of silver to export, Europeans mechanized their industries to make goods other than silver competitive in Asian markets. Population growth after 1750 also had different results at each end of Eurasia, Frank argued, polarizing wealth, feeding political crises, and discouraging innovation in China but providing cheaper labor for new factories in Britain. As the East fell apart the West had the industrial revolution that should, by rights, have happened in China; but because it happened in Britain, the West inherited the world.

Other short-termers, though, disagree. The sociologist Jack Goldstone (who taught for some years at the University of California's Davis campus and coined the term "California School" to describe the

short-term theorists) has argued that East and West were roughly equally well (or poorly) placed until 1600, each ruled by great agrarian empires with sophisticated priesthoods guarding ancient traditions. Everywhere from England to China, plagues, wars, and the overthrow of dynasties brought these societies to the brink of collapse in the seventeenth century, but whereas most of the empires recovered and reimposed strictly orthodox thought, northwest Europe's Protestants rejected Catholic traditions.

It was that act of defiance, Goldstone suggests, that sent the West down the path toward an industrial revolution. Freed from the fetters of archaic ideologies, European scientists laid bare the workings of nature so effectively that British entrepreneurs, sharing in this pragmatic can-do culture, learned to put coal and steam to work. By 1800 the West had pulled decisively ahead of the rest.

None of this was locked in, Goldstone argues, and in fact a few accidents could have changed the world completely. For instance, at the battle of the Boyne in 1690 a Catholic musket ball ripped through the shoulder of the coat worn by William of Orange, the Protestant pretender to England's throne. "It's well it came no nearer," William is supposed to have said; well indeed, says Goldstone, speculating that if the shot had hit a few inches lower England would have remained Catholic, France would have dominated Europe, and the industrial revolution might not have happened.

Kenneth Pomeranz at Irvine goes further still. As he sees it, the fact that there was an industrial revolution at all was a gigantic fluke. Around 1750, he argues, East and West were both heading for ecological catastrophe. Population had grown faster than technology and people had already done nearly everything possible in the way of extending and intensifying agriculture, moving goods around, and reorganizing themselves. They were about to hit the limits of what was possible with their technology, and there was every reason to expect global recession and declining population in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Yet the last two hundred years have seen more economic growth than all earlier history put together. The reason, Pomeranz explains in his important book *The Great Divergence*, is that western Europe, and above all Britain, just got lucky. Like Frank, Pomeranz sees the West's luck beginning with the accidental discovery of the Americas, creating a trading system that provided incentives to industrialize production;

but unlike Frank, he suggests that as late as 1800 Europe's luck could still have failed. It would have taken a lot of space, Pomeranz points out, to grow enough trees to feed Britain's crude early steam engines with wood—more space, in fact, than crowded western Europe had. But a second stroke of luck intervened: Britain, alone in all the world, had conveniently located coalfields as well as rapidly mechanizing industries. By 1840 Britons were applying coal-powered machines to every walk of life, including iron warships that could shoot their way up the Yangzi River. Britain would have needed to burn another 15 million acres of woodland each year—acres that did not exist—to match the energy now coming from coal. The fossil-fuel revolution had begun, ecological catastrophe had been averted (or at least postponed into the twenty-first century), and the West suddenly, against all odds, ruled the globe. There had been no long-term lock in. It was all just a recent, freakish accident.

The variety of short-term explanations of the Western industrial revolution, stretching from Pomeranz's fluke that averted global disaster to Frank's temporary shift within an expanding world economy, is every bit as wide as the gulf between, say, Jared Diamond and Karl Marx on the long-term side. Yet for all the controversy within both schools, it is the battle lines *between* them that produce the most starkly opposed theories of how the world works. Some long-termers claim that the revisionists are merely peddling shoddy, politically correct pseudo-scholarship; some short-termers respond that long-termers are pro-Western apologists or even racists.

The fact that so many experts can reach such wildly different conclusions suggests that something is wrong in the way we have approached the problem. In this book I will argue that long-termers and short-termers alike have misunderstood the shape of history and have therefore reached only partial and contradictory results. What we need, I believe, is a different perspective.

THE SHAPE OF HISTORY

What I mean by this is that both long-termers and short-termers agree that the West has dominated the globe for the last two hundred years, but disagree over what the world was like before this. Everything

revolves around their differing assessments of premodern history. The only way we can resolve the dispute is by looking at these earlier periods to establish the overall "shape" of history. Only then, with the baseline established, can we argue productively about why things turned out as they did.

Yet this is the one thing that almost no one seems to want to do. Most experts who write on why the West rules have backgrounds in economics, sociology, politics, or modern history; basically, they are specialists in current or recent events. They tend to focus on the last few generations, looking back at most five hundred years and treating earlier history briefly, if at all—even though the main issue at dispute is whether the factors that gave the West dominance were already present in earlier times or appeared abruptly in the modern age.

A handful of thinkers approach the question very differently, focusing on distant prehistory then skipping ahead to the modern age, saying little about the thousands of years in between. The geographer and historian Alfred Crosby makes explicit what many of these scholars take for granted—that the prehistoric invention of agriculture was critically important, but "between that era and [the] time of development of the societies that sent Columbus and other voyagers across the oceans, roughly 4,000 years passed, during which little of importance happened, *relative to what had gone before*."

This, I think, is mistaken. We will not find answers if we restrict our search to prehistory or modern times (nor, I hasten to add, would we find them if we limited ourselves to just the four or five millennia in between). The question requires us to look at the whole sweep of human history as a single story, establishing its overall shape, before discussing why it has that shape. This is what I try to do in this book, bringing a rather different set of skills to bear.

I was educated as an archaeologist and ancient historian, specializing in the classical Mediterranean of the first millennium BCE. When I started college at Birmingham University in England in 1978, most classical scholars I met seemed perfectly comfortable with the old long-term theory that the culture of the ancient Greeks, created two and a half thousand years ago, forged a distinctive Western way of life. Some of them (mostly older ones) would even say outright that this Greek tradition made the West better than the rest.

So far as I remember, none of this struck me as being a problem until I started graduate research at Cambridge University in the early 1980s, working on the origins of Greek city-states. This took me among anthropological archaeologists working on similar processes in other parts of the world. They openly laughed at the quaint notion that Greek culture was unique and had started a distinctive democratic and rational Western tradition. As people often do, for several years I managed to carry two contradictory notions in my head: on the one hand, Greek society evolved along the same lines as other ancient societies; on the other, it initiated a distinctive Western trajectory.

The balancing act got more difficult when I took my first faculty position, at the University of Chicago, in 1987. There I taught in Chicago's renowned History of Western Civilization program, ranging from ancient Athens to (eventually) the fall of communism. To stay even one day ahead of my students I had to read medieval and modern European history much more seriously than before, and I could not help noticing that for long stretches of time the freedom, reason, and inventiveness that Greece supposedly bequeathed to the West were more honored in the breach than the observance. Trying to make sense of this, I found myself looking at broader and broader slices of the human past. I was surprised how strong the parallels were between the supposedly unique Western experience and the history of other parts of the world, above all the great civilizations of China, India, and Iran.

Professors enjoy nothing more than complaining about their administrative burdens, but when I moved to Stanford University in 1995 I quickly learned that serving on committees could be an excellent way to find out what was going on outside my own little field. Since then I have directed the university's Social Science History Institute and Archaeology Center, served as chair of the Classics department and senior associate dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences, and run a large archaeological excavation—which all meant plenty of paperwork and headaches, but which also let me meet specialists in every field, from genetics to literary criticism, that might be relevant to working out why the West rules.

I learned one big thing: to answer this question we need a broad approach, combining the historian's focus on context, the archaeologist's awareness of the deep past, and the social scientist's comparative

methods. We could get this combination by assembling a multidisciplinary team of specialists, pooling deep expertise across a range of fields, and that is in fact just what I did when I started directing an archaeological excavation on Sicily. I knew nowhere near enough about botany to analyze the carbonized seeds we found, about zoology to identify the animal bones, about chemistry to make sense of the residues in storage vessels, about geology to reconstruct the landscape's formation processes, or about a host of other indispensable specialties, so I found specialists who did. An excavation director is a kind of academic impresario, bringing together talented artists who put on the show.

That is a good way to produce an excavation report, where the goal is to pile up data for others to use, but books-by-committee tend to be less good at developing unified answers to big questions. As a result, in the book you are reading now I take an *inter-* rather than *multi*disciplinary approach. Instead of riding shotgun over a herd of specialists, I strike off on my own to draw together and interpret the findings of experts in numerous fields.

This courts all kinds of dangers (superficiality, disciplinary bias, and just general error). I will never have the same subtle grasp of Chinese culture as someone who has spent a lifetime reading medieval manuscripts, or be as up-to-date on human evolution as a geneticist (I am told that the journal *Science* updates its website on average every thirteen seconds; while typing this sentence I have probably fallen behind again). But on the other hand, those who stay within the boundaries of their own disciplines will never see the big picture. The interdisciplinary, single-author model probably is the worst way to write a book like this—except for all the other ways. To me it certainly seems the least bad way to proceed, but you will have to judge from the results whether I am right.

So what are the results? I argue in this book that asking why the West rules is really a question about what I will call social development. By this I basically mean societies' abilities to get things done—to shape their physical, economic, social, and intellectual environments to their own ends. Back in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Western observers mostly took it for granted that social development was an unquestioned good. Development is progress (or evolution, or History), they implicitly and often explicitly said, and progress—whether toward God, affluence, or a people's paradise—is

the point of life. These days that seems less obvious. Many people feel that the environmental degradation, wars, inequality, and disillusionment that social development brings in its train far outweigh any benefits it generates.

Yet whatever moral charge we put on social development, its reality is undeniable. Almost all societies today are more developed (in the sense I defined that word in the previous paragraph) than they were a hundred years ago, and some societies today are more developed than others. In 1842 the hard truth was that Britain was more developed than China—so developed, in fact, that its reach had become global. There had been empires aplenty in the past, but their reach had always been regional. By 1842, however, British manufacturers could flood China with their products, British industrialists could build iron ships that outgunned any in the world, and British politicians could send an expedition halfway around the globe.

Asking why the West rules really means asking two questions. We need to know both why the West is more developed—that is, more able to get things done—than any other region of the world, and 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.

The only way to answer these questions, I believe, is by measuring social development to produce a graph that—literally—shows the shape of history. Once we do that, we will see that neither long-term lock-in nor short-term accident theories explain the shape of history very well at all. The answer to the first question—why Western social development is higher than that of any other part of the world—does not lie in any recent accident: the West has been the most developed region of the world for fourteen of the last fifteen millennia. But on the other hand, neither was the West's lead locked in in the distant past. For more than a thousand years, from about 550 through 1775 CE, Eastern regions scored higher. Western rule was neither predetermined thousands of years ago nor a result of recent accidents.

Nor can either long-term or short-term theories by themselves answer the second question, of why Western social development has risen so high compared to all earlier societies. As we will see, it was only around 1800 CE that Western scores began surging upward at astonishing rates; but this upturn was itself only the latest example of a very

long-term pattern of steadily accelerating social development. The long term and the short term work together.

This is why we cannot explain Western rule just by looking at prehistory or just by looking at the last few hundred years. To answer the question we have to make sense of the whole sweep of the past. Yet while charting the rise and fall of social development reveals the shape of history and shows us what needs to be explained, it doesn't actually *do* the explaining. For that we need to burrow into the details.

SLOTH, FEAR, AND GREED

"HISTORY, *n.* An account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools." It is sometimes hard to disagree with Ambrose Bierce's comic definition: history can seem to be just one damned thing after another, a chaotic jumble of geniuses and dolts, tyrants and romantics, poets and thieves, accomplishing the extraordinary or scraping the barrel of depravity.

Such people stud the pages that follow, which is as it should be. After all, it is flesh-and-blood individuals, not vast impersonal forces, who do all the living, dying, creating, and fighting in this world. Yet behind all the sound and fury, I will argue, the past nevertheless has strong patterns, and with the right tools historians can see what they are and even explain them.

I will use three of these tools.

The first is biology,* which tells us what humans truly are: clever chimps. We are part of the animal kingdom, which is itself part of the larger empire of life, stretching from the great apes all the way down to amoebas. This very obvious truth has three important consequences.

First, like all life-forms, we survive because we extract energy from our environment and turn that energy into more of ourselves.

Second, like all the more intelligent animals, we are curious creatures. We are constantly tinkering, wondering whether things are edible, whether we can have fun with them, whether we can improve

*Academic biology is a vast field; I draw on its ecological/evolutionary end rather than its molecular/cellular end.

them. We are just much better at tinkering than other animals, because we have big, fast brains with lots of folds to think things through, endlessly supple vocal cords to talk things through, and opposable thumbs to work things through.

That said, humans—like other animals—are obviously not all the same. Some extract more energy from the environment than others; some reproduce more than others; some are more curious, creative, clever, or practical than others. But the third consequence of our animalness is that large groups of humans, as opposed to individual humans, *are* all much the same. If you pluck two random people from a crowd, they may be as different as can be imagined, but if you round up two complete crowds they will tend to mirror each other rather closely. And if you compare groups millions strong, as I do in this book, they are likely to have very similar proportions of energetic, fertile, curious, creative, clever, talkative, and practical people.

These three rather commonsensical observations explain much of the course of history. For millennia social development has generally been increasing, thanks to our tinkering, and has generally done so at an accelerating rate. Good ideas beget more good ideas, and having once had good ideas we tend not to forget them. But as we will see, biology does not explain the whole history of social development. Sometimes social development has stagnated for long periods without rising at all; sometimes it has even gone into reverse. Just knowing that we are clever chimps is not enough.

This is where the second tool, sociology, comes in.* Sociology tells us simultaneously what causes social change and what social change causes. It is one thing for clever chimps to sit around tinkering, but it is another altogether for their ideas to catch on and change society. That, it seems, requires some sort of catalyst. The great science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein once suggested that "Progress is made by lazy men looking for easier ways to do things." We will see later in this book that this Heinlein Theorem is only partly true, because lazy

*I use "sociology" as a shorthand term for the social sciences more generally, and draw primarily on those branches that generalize about how all societies work rather than those that focus on differences. This definition cuts across traditional academic distinctions among sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science, and puts great emphasis on areas where biology and the social sciences meet, especially demography and psychology.

women are just as important as lazy men, sloth is not the *only* mother of invention, and "progress" is often a rather upbeat word for what happens. But if we flesh it out a little, I think Heinlein's insight becomes about as good a one-sentence summary of the causes of social change as we are likely to find. In fact, as the book goes on I will start passing off a less pithy version of it as my own Morris Theorem: "Change is caused by lazy, greedy, frightened people looking for easier, more profitable, and safer ways to do things. And they rarely know what they're doing." History teaches us that when the pressure is on, change takes off.

Greedy, lazy, frightened people seek their own preferred balance among being comfortable, working as little as possible, and being safe. But that is not the end of the story, because people's success in reproducing themselves and capturing energy inevitably puts pressure on the resources (intellectual and social as well as material) available to them. Rising social development generates the very forces that undermine further social development. I call this the paradox of development. Success creates new problems; solving them creates still newer problems. Life, as they say, is a vale of tears.

The paradox of development is constantly at work, confronting people with hard choices. Often people fail to rise to its challenges, and social development stagnates or even declines. At other times, though, sloth, fear, and greed combine to push some people to take risks, innovating to change the rules of the game. If at least a few of them succeed and if most people then adopt the successful innovations, a society might push through the resource bottleneck and social development will keep rising.

People confront, and solve, such problems every day, which is why social development has generally kept moving upward since the end of the last ice age. But as we will see, at certain points the paradox of development creates tough ceilings that will yield only to truly transformative changes. Social development sticks at these ceilings, setting off a desperate race. In case after case we will see that when societies fail to solve the problems that confront them, a terrible package of ills—famine, epidemic, uncontrolled migration, and state failure—begins to afflict them, turning stagnation into decline; and when famine, epidemic, migration, and state failure are joined by further forces of disruption, like climatic change (collectively, I call these the five horsemen of the apocalypse), decline can turn into disastrous, centuries-long collapses and dark ages.

Between them, biology and sociology explain most of the shape of history—why social development has generally risen, why it rises faster at some times and slower at others, and why it sometimes falls. But these biological and sociological laws are constants, applying everywhere, in all times and all places. They by definition tell us about humanity as a whole, not about why people in one place have fared so differently from those in another. To explain that, I will argue throughout this book, we need a third tool: geography.*

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

"The Art of Biography is different from Geography," the humorist Edmund Bentley observed in 1905; "Biography is about chaps, but Geography is about maps." For many years, chaps—in the British sense of upper-class men—dominated the stories historians told, to the point that history was barely distinguishable from biography. That changed in the twentieth century as historians made women, lower-class men, and children into honorary chaps too, adding their voices to the mix, but in this book I want to go further. Once we recognize that chaps (in large groups and in the newer, broader sense of the word) are all much the same, I will argue, all that is left is maps.

Many historians react to this claim like a bull to a red rag. It is one thing, several have said to me, to reject the old idea that a few great men determined that history would unfold differently in East and West; it is another altogether to say that culture, values, and beliefs were unimportant and to seek the reason why the West rules entirely in brute material forces. Yet that is more or less what I propose to do.

I will try to show that East and West have gone through the same stages of social development in the last fifteen thousand years, in the same order, because they have been peopled by the same kinds of

*Geography, like biology and sociology, is a huge and loosely defined field (so loosely defined, in fact, that since the 1940s many universities have decided that it is not an academic discipline at all and have closed their geography departments). I draw more on human/economic geography than on physical geography.

human beings, who generate the same kinds of history. But I will also try to show that they have not done so at the same times or at the same speed. I will conclude that biology and sociology explain the global similarities while geography explains the regional differences. And in that sense, it is geography that explains why the West rules.

Put so bluntly, this probably sounds like as hard-line a long-term lock-in theory as could be imagined, and there have certainly been historians who have seen geography that way. The idea goes back at least as far as Herodotus, the fifth-century-BCE Greek often credited with being the father of history. "Soft countries breed soft men," he insisted; and, like a string of determinists since him, he concluded that geography had destined his own homeland for greatness. Perhaps the most remarkable example is Ellsworth Huntington, a Yale University geographer who marshaled rafts of statistics in the 1910s to demonstrate that his hometown of New Haven, Connecticut, had an almost-ideal climate for stimulating people to greatness. (Only England was better.) By contrast, he concluded, the "too uniformly stimulating" climate of California—where I live—merely produced elevated rates of insanity. "The people of California," Huntington assured readers, "may perhaps be likened to horses which are urged to the limit so that some of them become unduly tired and break down."

It is easy to mock this kind of thing, but when I say that geography explains why the West rules I have something rather different in mind. Geographical differences do have long-term effects, but these are never locked in, and what counts as a geographical advantage at one stage of social development may be irrelevant or a positive disadvantage at another. We might say that while geography drives social development, social development determines what geography means. It is a two-way street.

To explain this a bit better—and to give a quick road map for the rest of the book—I would like to look back twenty thousand years, to the coldest point in the last ice age. Geography then mattered very much: mile-thick glaciers covered much of the northern hemisphere, dry and barely habitable tundras fringed them, and only closer to the equator could small bands of humans make a living by gathering and hunting. Distinctions between the south (where people could live) and the north (where they could not) were extreme, but within the southern zone distinctions between East and West were relatively minor.

The end of the Ice Age changed the meaning of geography. The poles remained cold and the equator remained hot, of course, but in half a dozen places between these extremes—what, in Chapter 2, I will call the original cores—warmer weather combined with local geography to favor the evolution of plants and/or animals that humans could domesticate (that is, genetically modify to make them more useful, eventually reaching the point that the genetically modified organisms could survive only in symbiosis with humans). Domesticated plants and animals meant more food, which meant more people, which meant more innovation; but domestication also meant more pressure on the very resources that drove the process. The paradox of development went straight to work.

These core regions had all been fairly typical of the relatively warm, habitable regions during the Ice Age, but they now grew increasingly distinct, both from the rest of the world and from one another. Geography had favored them all, but had favored some more than others. One core, the so-called Hilly Flanks in western Eurasia, had uniquely dense concentrations of domesticable plants and animals; and since groups of people are all much the same, it was here, where resources were richest and the process easiest, that moves toward domestication began. That was around 9500 BCE.

Following what I hope is common sense, throughout this book I use the expression "the West" to describe all the societies that have descended from this westernmost (and earliest) of the Eurasian cores. The West long ago expanded from the original core in southwest Asia* to encompass the Mediterranean Basin and Europe, and in the last few centuries the Americas and Australasia too. As I hope will become clear, defining "the West" like this (rather than picking on some supposedly uniquely "Western" values such as freedom, rationality, or tolerance, and then arguing about where these values came from and which parts of the world have them) has major consequences for understanding the world we live in. My goal is to explain why a particular set of societies that descend from the original Western core—above all, those of North America—now dominate the globe, rather than societies in another

*What, since the nineteenth century, people have rather confusingly called the "Middle East."

part of the West, societies descended from one of the other cores, or, for that matter, no societies at all.

Following the same logic, I use "the East" to refer to all those societies that descend from the easternmost (and second-oldest) of the Eurasian cores. The East also long ago expanded from its original core between China's Yellow and Yangzi rivers, where the domestication of plants began around 7500 BCE, and today stretches from Japan in the north into the countries of Indochina in the south.

The societies that descend from the other cores—a southeastern core in what is now New Guinea, a South Asian one in modern Pakistan and northern India, an African one in the eastern Sahara Desert, and two New World cores in Mexico and Peru—all have their own fascinating histories. I touch on these repeatedly in what follows, but I focus as relentlessly as I can on East-West comparisons. My reasoning is that since the end of the Ice Age, the world's most developed societies have almost always been ones that descended from either the original Western or the original Eastern core. While Albert in Beijing is a plausible alternative to Looty in Balmoral, Albert in Cuzco, Delhi, or New Guinea is not. The most efficient way to explain why the West rules is therefore to zero in on East-West comparisons, and that is what I have done.

Writing the book this way has its costs. A more properly global account, looking at every region of the world, would be richer and more nuanced, and would give the cultures of South Asia, the Americas, and other regions full credit for all the contributions they have made to civilization. But such a global version would also have drawbacks, particularly in loss of focus, and it would need even more pages than the book I did write. Samuel Johnson, eighteenth-century England's sharpest wit, once observed that while everyone admired *Paradise Lost*, "None ever wished it longer than it is." What applies to Milton, I suspect, applies even more to anything I might come up with.

If geography really did provide a Herodotus-style long-term lock-in explanation of history, I could wrap this book up rather quickly after pointing out that domestication began in the Western core around 9500 BCE and in the Eastern core around 7500. Western social development would simply have stayed two thousand years ahead of Eastern and the West would have gone through an industrial revolution while

the East was still figuring out writing. But that, obviously, did not happen. As we will see in the chapters that follow, geography did not lock in history, because geographical advantages are always ultimately self-defeating. They drive up social development, but in the process social development changes what geography means.

As social development rises, cores expand, sometimes through migration and sometimes through copying or independent innovation by neighbors. Techniques that worked well in an older core—whether those techniques were agriculture and village life, cities and states, great empires, or heavy industry—spread into new societies and new environments. Sometimes these techniques flourished in the new setting; sometimes they just muddled along; and sometimes they needed huge modifications to work at all.

Odd as it may seem, the biggest advances in social development often come in places where methods imported or copied from a more developed core do not work very well. Sometimes this is because the struggle to adapt old methods to new environments forces people to make breakthroughs; sometimes it is because geographical factors that do not matter much at one stage of social development matter much more at another.

Five thousand years ago, for instance, the fact that Portugal, Spain, France, and Britain stuck out from Europe into the Atlantic was a huge geographical disadvantage, meaning that these regions were a very long way from the real action in Mesopotamia* and Egypt. By five hundred years ago, however, social development had risen so much that geography changed its meanings. There were new kinds of ships that could cross what had always been impassable oceans, which abruptly made sticking out into the Atlantic a huge plus. It was Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English ships, rather than Egyptian or Iraqi ones, that started sailing to the Americas, China, and Japan. It was western Europeans who began tying the world together with maritime trade, and western European social development soared upward, overtaking the older core in the eastern Mediterranean.

*Mesopotamia is the ancient Greek name (literally meaning "between the rivers") for Iraq. By convention, historians and archaeologists use Mesopotamia for the period before the Arab invasion of 637 CE and Iraq after that date.

I call this pattern the "advantages of backwardness,"* and it is as ol
as social development itself. When agricultural villages began turnin
into cities (soon after 4000 BCE in the West and 2000 BCE in the East
for instance, access to the particular soils and climates that had favore
the initial emergence of agriculture began to matter less than access t
great rivers that could be tapped to irrigate fields or used as trade routes
And as states kept expanding, access to great rivers started matterin
less than access to metals, or to longer trade routes, or to sources
manpower. As social development changes, the resources it demand
change too, and regions that once counted for little may discover ad
vantages in their backwardness.

It is always hard to say in advance how the advantages of backward
ness will play out: not all backwardness is equal. Four hundred yea
ago, for instance, it seemed to many Europeans that the booming plan
tations of the Caribbean had a brighter future than North America
farms. With hindsight we can see why Haiti turned into the poore
place in the western hemisphere and the United States into the riche
but predicting such outcomes is much harder.

One very clear consequence of the advantages of backwardne
though, was that the most developed region within each core move
around over time. In the West it shifted from the Hilly Flanks (in th
age of early farmers) southward to the river valleys of Mesopotam
and Egypt as states emerged and then westward into the Mediterranea
Basin as trade and empires became more important. In the East it m
grated northward from the area between the Yellow and Yangzi rive
to the Yellow River basin itself, then westward to the Wei River an
the region of Qin.

A second consequence was that the West's lead in social develop
ment fluctuated, partly because these vital resources—wild plants an
animals, rivers, trade routes, manpower—were distributed in differe
ways across each core and partly because in both cores the process
of expansion and incorporation of new resources were violent an
unstable, pushing the paradox of development into overdrive. Th
growth of Western states in the second millennium BCE, for exampl
made the Mediterranean Sea not only a highway for commerce bu

*I borrow this term from the economist Alexander Gerschrenkon (although he us
it slightly differently).

also a highway for forces of disruption. Around 1200 BCE Western states lost control, and migrations, state failures, famines, and epidem
ics set off a core-wide collapse. The East, which had no such inland sea,
went through no comparable collapse, and by 1000 BCE the West's lead
in social development had narrowed sharply.

Over the three thousand years that followed, the same pattern has played out again and again with constantly changing consequences. Ge
ography determined where in the world social development would rise
fastest, but rising social development changed what geography meant. At
different points the great steppes linking eastern and western Eurasia, the
rich rice lands of southern China, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic
Ocean were all crucially important; and when the Atlantic rose to prom
inence in the seventeenth century CE, those people best placed to exploit
it—at first chiefly the British, then their former colonists in America—
created new kinds of empires and economies and unlocked the energy
trapped in fossil fuels. And that, I will argue, is why the West rules.

THE PLAN

I have divided the chapters that follow into three sections. Part I (Chapters 1–3) confronts the most basic issues: What is the West? Where do we start our story? What do we mean by "rule"? How can we tell who is leading or ruling? In Chapter 1, I set out the biological basis of the story in the evolution and dispersal of modern humans over the planet; in Chapter 2, I trace the formation and growth of the original Eastern and Western cores after the Ice Age; and in Chapter 3, I break the narrative to define social development and explain how I will use it to measure differences between East and West.*

In Part II (Chapters 4–10), I trace the stories of East and West in detail, asking constantly what explains their similarities and differences. In Chapter 4, I look at the rise of the first states and the great disruptions that wracked the Western core in the centuries down to 1200 BCE. In Chapter 5, I consider the first great Eastern and Western empires and how their social development rose toward the limits of

*I present more technical accounts in the appendix to this book and on my website, www.ianmorris.org.

what was possible in agricultural economies; then in Chapter 6, I discuss the great collapse that swept Eurasia after about 150 CE. In Chapter 7, we reach a turning point, with the Eastern core opening a new frontier and taking the lead in social development. By about 1100 CE the East was again pressing against the limits of what was possible in an agricultural world, but in Chapter 8 we will see how this set off a second great collapse. In Chapter 9, I describe the new frontiers that Eastern and Western empires created on the steppes and across the ocean as they recovered, and examine how the West closed the development gap on the East. Finally, in Chapter 10, we will see how the industrial revolution converted the West's lead into rule and the enormous consequences this had.

In Part III (Chapters 11 and 12) I turn to the most important question for any historian: So what? First, in Chapter 11, I pull together my argument that behind all the details of what has happened in the last fifteen thousand years, two sets of laws—those of biology and sociology—determined the shape of history on a global scale, while a third set—those of geography—determined the differences between Eastern and Western development. It was the ongoing interplay between these laws, not long-term lock-ins or short-term accidents, that sent Looty to Balmoral rather than Albert to Beijing.

This is not how historians normally talk about the past. Most scholars seek explanations in culture, beliefs, values, institutions, or blind accident rather than the hard surfaces of material reality, and few would be caught dead speaking of laws. But after considering (and rejecting) some of these alternatives, I want to go one step further, suggesting in Chapter 12 that the laws of history in fact give us a pretty good sense of what is likely to happen next. History has not come to an end with Western rule. The paradox of development and the advantages of backwardness are still operating; the race between the innovations that drive social development upward and the disruptions that drag it down is still on. In fact, I will suggest, the race is hotter than ever. New kinds of development and disruption promise—or threaten—to transform not just geography but biology and sociology too. The great question for our times is not whether the West will continue to rule. It is whether humanity as a whole will break through to an entirely new kind of existence before disaster strikes us down—permanently.

PART I