

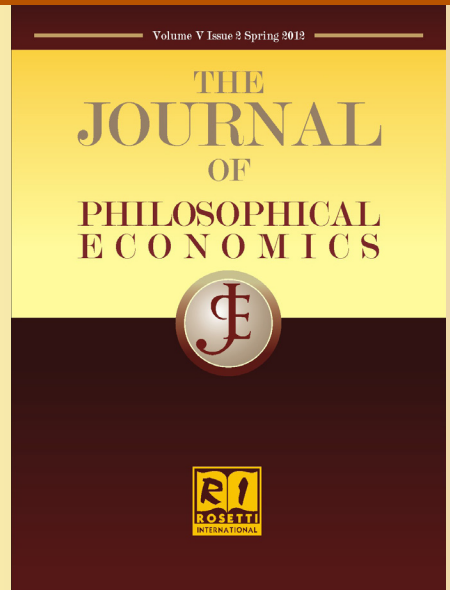
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Civilization: The West and the Rest,  
Allen Lane, Penguin Books, London,  
2011, pp. 385.*

**Andrei Josan**



## **Review of Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, London, 2011, pp. 385.**

*Andrei Josan*

In his 2003 book, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for the Global Power* [1], the British historian Niall Ferguson, a Professor of History at Harvard University, a Senior Research Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford University, and also a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, tried to answer one of the fundamental questions not just of British but of world history: "How an archipelago of rainy islands off the north-west coast of Europe came to rule the world and why should the United States care about the history of the British Empire?" Ferguson argued that the parallels between today's empire and yesterday's can never be exact, but it is clear that today's debate about American global power can only be enriched by a proper understanding of how the last great Anglophone empire functioned. Ferguson stated that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the United States is "an empire in denial" capable of playing an imperial role in the world today, much the way Britain once did, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In his 2004 book, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of America's Empire*, Ferguson warned that the United States had imperceptibly come to rely on East Asian capital to fund its unbalanced current and fiscal accounts. Ferguson came to the conclusion that "the decline and fall of America's undeclared empire might therefore be due not to terrorists at the gates nor to the rogue regimes that sponsored them, but to a financial crisis at the very heart of the empire itself." [pp. 19-20] [2] In 2006, Ferguson and Moritz Schularick coined the word *Chimerica* to describe what they saw as the dangerously unsustainable relationship between a "parsimonious" China and a "profligate" America. Ferguson and Schularick identified one of the keys to the coming global financial crisis: without the availability to the American consumer of both cheap Chinese labour and cheap Chinese capital, the bubble of the years 2002-

2007 would not have been so egregious [p. 20]. Ferguson pointed out that "after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, the sham verities of the 'Washington Consensus' and the "Great Moderation" – the central bankers' equivalent of the "End of History" [3] were consigned to oblivion" (p. 20) and a second Great Depression for a time seemed terrifyingly possible.

Ferguson's new 2011 book asserts that now we are living through "the end of 500 years of Western ascendancy". Like four of his last five books, *Civilization* was from its earliest inception a television series as well as a book. *Civilization*, as Ferguson stressed, is not a history of the West but a history of the world, in which Western dominance is the phenomenon to be explained. The West had patently enjoyed a real and sustained edge over the Rest for most of the previous 500 years. The gap between Western and Chinese incomes had begun to open up as long ago as the 1600s and had continued to widen until as recently as the late 1970s, if not later. But since then it had narrowed with astonishing speed. The financial crisis crystallized the next historical question Ferguson wanted to ask: "Had that Western edge now gone?" (p. 22)

For Ferguson *Why did the West come to dominate the Rest?* is a question that demands something more than a just-so story in response. The answer needs to be analytical, it needs to be supported by evidence and it needs to be testable by means of the counterfactual. Ferguson's subsidiary question is this: "If we can come up with a good explanation for the West's past ascendancy, can we then offer a prognosis for its future? Is this really the end of West's world and the advent of a new Eastern epoch?" (pp. 17-8) Ferguson wants to show that what distinguished the West from the Rest – the mainsprings of global power – were six identifiably novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas and behaviours. For instance, Ferguson uses a classic and strong argument to emphasize the importance of culture and institutions in shaping the fate of human societies: "Institutions are...in some sense the products of culture. But, because they formalize a set of norms, institutions are often the things that keep a culture honest, determining how far it is conducive to good behavior rather than bad. To illustrate the point, the twentieth century ran a series of experiments, imposing quite different institutions on two sets of Germans (in West and East), two sets of Koreans (in North and South) and two sets of Chinese (inside and outside the People's Republic). The results were striking and the lesson crystal clear. If you take the same people, with more or less the same culture, and impose communist institutions on one group and capitalist institutions on another, almost immediate there will be a divergence in the way they behave." (p. 53)

Indeed, the central thesis of the book is that six “killer apps”, along with “fortuitous weakness of the West rivals”, enabled the West to dominate the world for the better part of the last 500 years. Those “killer apps” that allowed a minority of mankind originating on the western edge of Eurasia to dominate the world were: 1) competition – a decentralization of both political and economic life, which created the launch-pad for both nation-states and capitalism; 2) science – a way of studying, understanding and ultimately changing the natural world, which gave the West (among other things) a major military advantage over the Rest; 3) property rights – the rule of law as a means of protecting private owners and peacefully resolving disputes between them, which formed the basis for the most stable form of representative government; 4) medicine – a branch of science that allowed a major improvement in health and life expectancy, beginning in Western societies, but also in their colonies; 5) the consumer society – a mode of material living in which the production and purchase of clothing and other consumer goods play a central economic role, and without which the Industrial Revolution would have been unsustainable; 6) the work ethic – a moral framework and mode of activity derivable from (among other sources) Protestant Christianity, which provides the glue for the dynamics and potentially unstable society created by apps 1 to 5. To put in other words, for Ferguson the critical point is that the differential between the West and the Rest was institutional (pp. 55-6). The book’s main arguments owe a decided debt to ones made by a long list of thinkers such as Max Weber, Fernand Braudel, David Landes, Jared Diamond, Thomas L. Friedman and Fareed Zakaria [4].

The whole point of Ferguson’s journey through the world history is to find an answer to another important question: “Is the West headed toward a fall like ancient Rome’s?” Ferguson suggests, based on the cases of Rome’s implosion, of the dramatic transition from Confucian to anarchy in Ming-era China, and the fast and surprising fall of the Soviet Union, that the collapses of almost all the great civilizations tend to come very quickly, especially because civilizations are highly complex systems, made up of a very large number of interacting components that are asymmetrically organized, so that even such systems can appear to operate quite stably for some time, apparently in equilibrium, in reality constantly adapting, there is a time when any slight perturbation can set off a phase of transition from a benign equilibrium to a crisis. Ferguson concludes that even in the late 1990s the West was still clearly the dominant civilization of the world, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century political factionalism, fiscal and financial crises, the divisions within the United States

and within the European Union, the overextension of American military forces in the wake of costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the rise of China are signs of the transition to a new world order.

The book has some minor "flaws": its more original arguments tend to devolve into questionable generalizations, contradictory assertions and gives a feeling of disorganization that underscores its genesis as a companion volume to a television series. Overall, *Civilization* is a very interesting account of the rise (and potential decline) of the West, with chapters organized along those six killer apps and with a powerful narrative.

## Endnotes

[1] Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, London, 2002

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, quotations come from this reviewed book.

[3] The thesis of Francis Fukuyama from Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992.

[4] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (1905), Translated by Stephen Kalberg (2002), Roxbury Publishing Company, 2002; Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Centuries*, [3 volumes], William Collins & Sons, London, 1981-1984; David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1998; Jared Diamond, *Guns, Gems, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1997; Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Viking Books, New York, 2005; Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1999; Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York,, 2005; Thomas L. Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York,, 2008; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2008; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World. Release 2.0*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2011.

Andrei Josan is a lecturer in history at the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences, the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (andrei\_jsn@yahoo.com)