**Latitudes not Attitudes: How Geography Explains History**

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Many reasons have been given for the West’s dominance over the last 500 years. But, Ian Morris argues, its rise to global hegemony was largely due to geographical good fortune.

I am wearing your clothes, I speak your language, I watch your films and today is whatever date it is because you say so.

This is what Shad Faruki, a Malaysian lawyer, told the British journalist Martin Jacques in a 1994 interview. And he was right: for 200 years, a few nations clustered around the shores of the North Atlantic – ‘the West’, as we normally call them – have dominated the world in ways without parallel in history.

Most people, at some point or another, have wondered why the West rules. There are theories beyond number. Perhaps, say some, westerners are just biologically superior to everyone else. Or maybe western culture is uniquely dynamic; or possibly the West has had better leaders; or the West’s democratic politics and its Christianity might give it an edge. Some think western domination has been locked in since time immemorial: others that it is merely a recent accident. And, with many westerners now looking to China’s double-digit economic growth to pull the world out of recession, some historians even suggest that western rule has been an aberration, a brief interruption of an older, Sinocentric, world order. When experts disagree so deeply, it usually means that we need fresh perspectives on a problem. Most of those who pronounce on Western rule – economists, political pundits, sociologists – tend to focus on recent times and then make sweeping claims about the past. Asking why the West rules, though, really requires us to work the other way round, posing questions about history, then seeing where they lead. As the masthead of this magazine puts it: ‘What happened then matters now.’

**The shape of history**

Explaining why the West rules calls for a different kind of history than usual, one stepping back from the details to see broader patterns, playing out over millennia on a global scale. When we do this the first thing we see is the biological unity of humanity, which flatly disproves racist theories of western rule.

Our kind, Homo sapiens, evolved in Africa between 200,000 and 70,000 years ago and has spread across the world in the last 60,000 years. By around 30,000 years ago, older versions of humanity, such as the Neanderthals, were extinct and by 10,000 years ago a single kind of human – us – had colonised virtually every niche on the planet. This dispersal allowed humanity’s genes to diverge again, but most of the consequences (such as the colour of skin, eyes, or hair) are, literally, only skin deep and those mutations that do go deeper (such as head shape or lactose tolerance) have little obvious connection to why the West rules. A proper answer to this question must start from the fact that wherever we go – East, West, North, or South – people are all much the same.

So why have their histories turned out so differently? Many historians suggest that there is something unique about western culture. Just look, they say, at the philosophy of Socrates, the wisdom of the Bible, or the glories of Leonardo da Vinci; since antiquity, the West has simply outshone the rest. Such cultural comparisons, however, are notoriously subjective. Socrates, for instance, was certainly a great thinker; but the years in which he was active, during the fifth century bc, were also the age of the Hebrew prophets in Israel, of the Buddha and the founders of Jainism in India, of Confucius and the first Daoists in China. All these sages wrestled with much the same questions as Socrates (Can I know reality? What is the good life? How do we perfect society?) and the thoughts of each became ‘the classics’, timeless masterpieces that have defined the meanings of life for millions of people ever since.

So strong are the similarities between the Greco-Roman, Jewish, Indian and Chinese classics, in fact, that scholars often call the first millennium bc the ‘Axial Age’, in the sense of it being an axis around which the whole history of Eurasian thought turned. From the Mediterranean to the Yellow Sea, larger, more complex societies were facing similar challenges in the first millennium bc and finding similar answers. Socrates was part of a huge pattern, not a unique giant who sent the West down a superior path.

From a global perspective, Christianity, too, makes more sense as a local version of a broader trend than as something setting the West apart from the rest. As the Roman Empire disintegrated in the middle of the first millennium ad and new questions (Is there something beyond this life? How can I be saved?) gained urgency, the new faith won perhaps 40 million converts; but in those same years, in the wake of the Han dynasty’s collapse in China, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism offered their own answers to the same questions and won their own 40 million devotees. Soon enough Islam repeated the feat in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

Even such astonishing Renaissance men as Leonardo and Michelangelo, who refined the wisdom of the ancient West to revolutionise everything from aeronautics to art, are best seen as Europe’s versions of a new kind of intellectual which societies needed as they emerged from the Middle Ages. China had produced its own Renaissance men some 400 years earlier, who also refined ancient wisdom (in their case, of course, the East’s) to revolutionise everything. Shen Kua (1031-95 ad), for instance, published groundbreaking work on agriculture, archaeology, cartography, climate change, the classics, ethnography, geology, maths, medicine, metallurgy, meteorology, music, painting and zoology. Even Leonardo would have been impressed.

Over and over again, the triumphs of western culture turn out to have been local versions of broader trends, not lonely beacons in a general darkness and, if we think about culture in a broader, more anthropological sense, the West’s history again seems to be one example of a larger pattern rather than a unique story. For most of their existence, humans lived in small, egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands. After the Ice Age some hunter-gatherers settled down in villages, where they domesticated plants and animals; some villages grew into cities, with ruling elites; some cities became states and then empires and, finally, industrialised nations. No society has ever leaped from hunting and gathering to high technology (except under the influence of outsiders). Humans are all much the same, wherever we find them; and, because of this, human societies have all followed much the same sequence of cultural development. There is nothing special about the West.

**Location, location, location**

You may have noticed that all the historical examples I have mentioned – Italy, Greece, Israel, India, China – lie in a narrow band of latitudes, roughly 20-35° north, stretching across the Old World. This is no accident: in fact, it is a crucial clue as to why the West rules. Humans may all be much the same, wherever we find them, but the places we find them in are not. Geography is unfair and can make all the difference in the world.

When temperatures rose at the end of the last Ice Age, nearly 12,000 years ago, global warming had massive consequences everywhere, but, as in our own times, it impacted on some places more than on others. In the latitudes between 20° and 35° north in the Old World and a similar band between 15° south and 20° north in the Americas, large-grained wild grasses like wheat, rice and teosinte (the ancestor of maize) and large, relatively tame mammals like wild goats, pigs and llamas went forth and multiplied in the warmer weather. This was a boon for humans, who ate them, but in the process of managing these other species – cultivating and tending the plants, herding and culling the animals – humans unintentionally domesticated them. We unwittingly altered their genomes so much that they became new species, providing us with far more food. Genetically modified organisms had been born. Potentially domesticable plants and animals existed outside the lucky latitudes, but they were less common. Indeed many places, such as large parts of Western Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and Australia, had no domesticable native species at all. The consequence, given that humans were all much the same, was predictable: the domestication of plants and animals – farming – began in the lucky latitudes long before it began outside them. This was not because people in the lucky latitudes were cleverer or harder-working; nature had just given them more to work with than people in other places and so the task advanced more quickly.

Nor was nature even-handed within the lucky latitudes. Some places, above all the so-called ‘Hilly Flanks’, which curve from what is now Israel through Syria, southern Turkey, northern Iraq and western Iran, were extraordinarily well endowed; China between the Yellow and Yangzi rivers and the Indus Valley in Pakistan were somewhat less so; Oaxaca in Mexico and the Andes in Peru somewhat less still. Consequently, the Hilly Flanks were the first to see farming firmly established (by 7500 bc); then came China and Pakistan (around 5500 bc); then Oaxaca and Peru (by 5000 bc); and then, over the next 7,000 years, most of the rest of humanity.

Farming spread from its original cores because it could support more people than hunting and gathering. The lives farmers led were often harder and their diets poorer than hunters’, but that was beside the point. The farmers’ weight of numbers, nastier germs (bred by crowding and proximity to domestic animals), more efficient organisation (required to keep order in larger villages) and superior weapons (necessary to settle constant quarrels) steadily dispossessed the hunters, who either took up farming in their own right or ran away.

The agricultural cores developed increasingly complex institutions as they expanded. Within 3-4,000 years of the start of farming (that is, by 3500 bc in Southwest Asia, 2500 bc in the Indus Valley, 1900 bc in China, 1500 bc in Mesoamerica and 1000 bc in the Andes) the first cities and states were taking shape. Within another few centuries, most had bureaucrats keeping written records and by 2,000 years ago a continuous band of empires, with populations in the tens of millions, stretched from the Mediterranean to China. By then imperialists and traders had exported agriculture, cities and writing beyond the lucky latitudes as far afield as cold, rainy Britain in the northwest and hot, humid Cambodia in the southeast. These great empires – the Han in the East, the Mauryan in India, the Parthian in Iran and Iraq and the Roman further west – had many similarities; but the biggest, richest and grandest by far was Rome, the descendant of Eurasia’s original, westernmost agricultural core in the Hilly Flanks.

Geography explains why farming first appeared towards the western end of the Old World’s lucky latitudes; and, if the West had simply held on to the early lead that nature’s unfairness had given it, geography would be the obvious explanation for why the West now dominates the world.

But that is not what actually happened. The West has not always been the richest, most powerful and most sophisticated part of the world during the last ten millennia. For more than 1,000 years, from at least 600 to 1700 ad, these superlatives applied to China, not the West.

After the fall of the Roman and Han empires in the early-to-mid first millennium ad, China was reunited into a single empire while the West remained divided between smaller states and invading Arabs. By 700, China’s capital at Chang’an had probably a million residents and Chinese literature was enjoying a golden age. Woodblock printing presses churned out millions of books, paid for with the world’s first paper money (invented in the 10th century). By 1000 an economic revolution had joined the cultural explosion: 11th-century China produced almost as much iron each year as the whole of Europe would be doing in 1700, on the eve of its Industrial Revolution. Chinese ironmasters produced so much, in fact, that they clear-cut entire forests to feed their forges, and – six centuries ahead of the West – learned to smelt their ores with coke.

For centuries, Chinese wealth and power dwarfed the West’s. Between 1405 and 1433, while little Portuguese caravels tentatively nosed down Africa’s west coast, Chinese emperors dispatched gigantic fleets across the Indian Ocean under the leadership of the eunuch admiral Zheng He (who, according to legend, was nearly three metres tall and 230 cm around the belly). Zheng’s flagship was on the same scale as its skipper. At 80 metres long, it was the largest wooden ship ever built. When Columbus set sail in 1492, his own flagship was shorter than Zheng’s mainmast and barely twice as long as the big man’s rudder. Columbus led three ships and 90 sailors; Zheng led 300 ships and 27,870 sailors. His fleet extracted tribute from the cities of India, visited Mecca and even reached Kenya, where today Chinese archaeologists are diving to locate wrecks of Zheng’s ships.

**The power of place**

The glories of medieval China seem, on the face of it, to disprove any geographical explanation for why the West now rules. After all, geography has not changed very much in the last 500 years.

Or maybe it has. Geography shapes history, but not in straightforward ways. Geography does determine why societies in some parts of the world develop so much faster than others; but, at the same time, the level to which societies have developed determines what geography means.

Take, once again, the example of Britain, sticking out from Eurasia into the cold Atlantic Ocean. Four thousand years ago, Britain was far from the centres of action in the Nile, Indus and Yellow River valleys, where farming had been established for millennia, great cities had grown up and labourers by the thousand broke their backs to immortalise divine kings with pyramids and palaces. Distant Britain had few of these things, which spread only slowly from the Mediterranean core to the Atlantic periphery. Geography made Britain backward.

But, if we fast-forward to 400 years ago, the same geography that had once made Britain backward now gave the island nation wealth and power. Britain had been drawn into a vastly expanded and more developed core, which now had ships that could reliably cross oceans and guns that could shoot the people on the other side. Sticking out into the Atlantic, such a huge disadvantage 4,000 years ago, became a huge plus from the 17th century.

The first sailors to the Americas were Italians (Christopher Columbus was from Genoa; the famous ‘British’ explorer John Cabot, who reached Newfoundland in 1497, actually grew up as Giovanni Caboto, in Florence). They were soon shoved aside by the Portuguese, Spanish, British, French and Dutch – not because the Atlantic littoral produced bolder or smarter adventurers than the Mediterranean, but simply because Western Europe was closer to America.

Given time, the 15th century’s greatest sailors – the Chinese – would surely have discovered and colonised America too (in 2009 the Princess Taiping, a replica of a 15th-century junk, came within 20 miles of completing a Taiwan–San Francisco round trip, only to collide with a freight ship within sight of home). But in much the same way that geography had made it easier for people in the Hilly Flanks to domesticate plants and animals than for people in other parts of the world, it now again stacked the odds in the West’s favour. The trip from England to New England was only half as far as that from China to California. For thousands of years this geographical fact had been unimportant, since there were no ocean-going ships. But by 1600 it had become the decisive fact. The meaning of geography had changed.

This was just the beginning of the changes. In the 17th century a new kind of economy took shape, centred around the North Atlantic, generating massive profits and driving up wages in north-west Europe by exploiting the geographical differences round its shores. In the process, it enormously increased the rewards for anyone who could explain how the winds and tides worked, or measure and count in better ways, or make sense of the secrets of physics, chemistry and biology. Not surprisingly, Europeans began thinking about the world in new ways, setting off a scientific revolution; they then applied its insights to the societies they lived in, in what we now call the Enlightenment. Newton and Descartes were geniuses, but so too were Chinese scholars like Gu Yanwu (1613-82) and Dai Zhen (1724-77), who also spent lifetimes studying nature. It was just that geography thrust new questions on Newton and Descartes.

Westerners answered their new questions, only to find that the answers led to still newer questions. By 1800 the combination of science and the Atlantic economy created incentives and opportunities for entrepreneurs to mechanise production and tap into the power of fossil fuels. This began in Britain, where geography conspired to make these things easier than anywhere else; and the energy windfall provided by fossil fuel quickly translated into a population explosion, rising living standards and massive military power. All barriers crumbled. British warships forced China to open to western trade in 1842; Americans did the same in Japan 11 years later. The age of western rule had arrived.

**The lessons of history**

So what do we learn from all this history? Two main things, I think. First, since people are all much the same, it is our shared biology which explains humanity’s great upward leaps in wealth, productivity and power across the last 10,000 years; and, second, that it is geography which explains why one part of world – the nations we conventionally call ‘the West’ – now dominates the rest.

Geography determined that when the world warmed up at the end of the Ice Age a band of lucky latitudes stretching across Eurasia from the Mediterranean to China developed agriculture earlier than other parts of the world and then went on to be the first to invent cities, states and empires. But as social development increased, it changed what geography meant and the centres of power and wealth shifted around within these lucky latitudes. Until about ad 500 the Western end of Eurasia hung on to its early lead, but after the fall of the Roman Empire and Han dynasty the centre of gravity moved eastward to China, where it stayed for more than a millennium. Only around 1700 did it shift westward again, largely due to inventions – guns, compasses, ocean-going ships – which were originally pioneered in the East but which, thanks to geography, proved more useful in the West. Westerners then created an Atlantic economy which raised profound new questions about how the world worked, pushing westerners into a Scientific Revolution, an Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. By the mid-19th century, the West dominated the globe.

But history did not end there. The same laws of geography continued operating. By 1900 the British-dominated global economy had drawn in the vast resources of North America, converting the USA from a rather backward periphery into a new global core. The process continued in the 20th century, as the American-dominated global economy drew in the resources of Asia, turning first Japan, then the ‘Asian Tigers’ and eventually China and India into major players.

Extrapolating from these historical patterns, we can make some predictions. If the processes of change continue across the 21st century at the same rate as in the 20th century, the economies of the East will overtake those of the West by 2100. But if the rate of change keeps accelerating – as it has done constantly since the 15th century – we can expect eastern global dominance as soon as 2050.

**An age of rapid change**

It all seems very clear – except for one niggling detail. The past shows that, while geography shapes the development of societies, development also shapes what geography means; and all the signs are that in the 21st century the meanings of geography are changing faster than ever. Geography is, we might even say, losing meaning. The world is shrinking and the greatest challenges we face – nuclear weapons, climate change, mass migration, epidemics, food and water supply – are all global problems. Perhaps the real lesson of history is that by the time the East overtakes the West, the question of why the West rules may have ceased to matter very much.

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**Further reading:**

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