In our age of soundbites and tweets, an e-journal that can accommodate not only a 9,000-word book review like Professor Duchesne’s but also a 3,500-word response from the author is a wonderful thing. Historians, after all, are supposed to make progress through the cut-and-thrust of public debate, and it is hard to imagine a better way to accomplish this than in the virtual pages of Reviews in History.

Last autumn, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (in the US) and Profile (in Britain) published my book Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History and What they Reveal About the Future. For reasons I will come to in a moment, I would like to take advantage of the scope provided by Reviews in History by starting with a summary of the book’s argument, and only then turning to the criticisms that Professor Duchesne levels at it.

The main idea in my book is that we need three sets of tools to explain why the West rules (for now). These tools, I suggest, come from biology, sociology, and geography. Biology is fundamental. The lessons I draw from it are: (a) that humans are animals; (b) that – as animals – we have fairly predictable characteristics; and (c) that these human animals are much the same wherever we find them. Sociology, by contrast, teaches us how these animals behave in groups; and when we put biology and sociology together, they provide a universalizing biosocial science, applicable to all people in all times and places.

This biosocial theory does not, though, explain why history has unfolded differently in different parts of the world, let alone why the West rose to dominance in the last few centuries. To explain that, we need geography. People are all much the same; their societies all develop along much the same lines; but the places human societies develop in are different, and these differences generate different outcomes. It is geography that explains why the West came to dominate the world – and why that domination may soon end.

This is a very simple theory, and a very old one, which in a sense goes back to Herodotus. Yet it has big implications: it means that the attention historians lavish on great men and women, bungling idiots, culture, religion, politics, identity, and so on is misplaced. These subjects are usually interesting, but they are rarely important. They are noise, and we should not allow them to mask the real signal.

The reason there is so much noise – or, to put it another way, why history is so messy – is that the signal, geography, is also messy. Geography is, in fact, a two-way street. On the one hand, geography determines how societies develop; on the other, the ways that societies develop determine what geography means. I spend most of the book tracing the back-and-forth interaction between social development and geography across the 15,000 years since the end of the ice age, showing how this produced the world we live in, and where it may take us in the 21st century.

I begin at the end of the ice age because that is the first point since behaviorally modern Homo sapiens evolved (which now seems to have been around 75,000 years ago, ± 25,000 years) that we can see really distinct ways of life emerging in different parts of the world. Geography was very clearly the reason that these distinct ways of life took shape: it determined that in roughly half a dozen places in the same band of latitudes across the Old and New Worlds, plants and animals evolved that could be domesticated by humans as the postglacial world warmed up.

The earliest, biggest, and most richly endowed of these core areas was in Southwest Asia. Across the last ten
millennia BCE its population boomed, and complex societies, eventually organized around cities and states, spread from the original Southwest Asian core across Europe and toward central Asia. The Roman Empire, Renaissance Italy, industrial England—all ultimately descend (via many transformations) from this original Southwest Asian core of complex societies, and following what seems to me commonsense, I call all these societies ‘Western’. The book’s central question is why it has been societies that descend from the original Western core, rather than societies that descend from one of the other cores, or no societies at all, that have dominated the planet for the last 200 years.

The only way to answer that question is comparatively, setting the Western historical record alongside evidence from other parts of the world. For reasons I go into in the book (particularly on p. 32), rather than doing a blanket, global-level comparison between the West and the rest, it seemed more productive to focus on just the West and one other regional tradition, the complex societies that developed out of the easternmost core in Eurasia, between what are now the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. Again following what I think is commonsense, I call all these societies ‘Eastern’.

I suggest that one reason why there is so little consensus on the reasons for Western domination is that comparisons have not been systematic, and I try to deal with that by creating a numerical index of social development, which basically measures societies’ abilities to impose their will on the world around them. This index suggests that the societies with the highest social development scores have been in the West for 90 per cent of the time since the end of the last ice age. Anyone who thinks that all cultures are the same, and that the West is no different from the rest of the world, has to explain this fact.

That said, Western social development has not been the highest in the world for the whole period since the end of the last ice age; between roughly 550 and 1750 CE Eastern societies pulled ahead on the index, interrupting the West’s lead in social development for 1,200 years. Anyone who thinks that Western dominance is the product of a long cultural tradition, stretching back to the ancient Greeks, has to explain this fact. And anyone who really wants to explain why the West rules has to account for both of these facts.

The best explanation, I conclude, is that geography gave Western development a head start at the end of the ice age, but that as social development rose (and sometimes fell), geography kept changing its meanings. This, I argue across the 768 pages of my book, is why the East caught up with Western development levels in the 6th century, the West regained its lead in the 18th, and the East looks set to catch up again by the end of the 21st … unless, of course, something happens to prevent that outcome—or to make it irrelevant.

Professor Duchesne vigorously disputes my claims. What ‘set the West apart’, he says,

was the continuous sequence of original giants in Greece and in Rome, in medieval Europe, and throughout the modern era. The West was always filled with individuals persistently searching for new worlds, new visions, and new styles of painting, architecture, music, science, philosophy, and literature—in comparative contrast, for example, to the intellectual traditions set down in ancient China—Confucianism, Legalism, Taoism (and later Buddhism)—which persisted in their essentials until the impact of the West occasioned some novelties.

My explanation of the shape of history is consistently materialist; Professor Duchesne’s consistently emphasizes culture. This is a fundamental disagreement, and, to my mind, one that fully justifies a 9,000-word review and an author’s response.

That said, the way Professor Duchesne pursues the debate strikes me as extremely odd. Despite his review’s length, rather little of it takes on my book’s central thesis, which is why I spent so long summarizing my argument at the beginning of this response.

Instead of beginning by summarizing my arguments, Professor Duchesne opens his review by complaining that the blurbs on my book’s dust jacket are too positive. It’s normal practice for trade presses (and increasingly for academic presses too) to employ publicists, who badger prominent authors into saying
glowing things about a new book. The whole point of the exercise is that the blurbs should be more positive than the reviews the book gets in newspapers and journals; if they’re not, the press may as well fire the publicist and save itself a paycheck.

 Personally, I think that some of the published reviews of my book (especially in the *Financial Times*, *Literary Review*, and *Foreign Affairs*) use nicer adjectives than the solicited blurbs. But that is perhaps beside the point, which is that a book review should be about a book, not about what other people have said about a book. Grumbling about blurbs is at best a distraction and at worst downright odd. And taking a whole paragraph to imply that David Landes – who very generously took the time, despite a serious illness, to comment on the manuscript of a book that disagrees with his own work at many points – blurbed this book without reading it is, I would say, even odder.

 Professor Duchesne then jumps straight into the middle of my book, dismissing my account of 15th-century intercontinental travel as ‘Drawing on Gavin Menzies’ discredited book, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*. This, again, strikes me as odd.

 Commander Menzies’ *1421* argues that in that year, sailors from Zheng He’s Treasure Fleets explored the coasts of America, Australia, the Atlantic, and Antarctica. It is an unorthodox piece of historical writing, drawing more on Commander Menzies’ experience as a submariner than on conventional historical documentation, but it is also the most widely read book on Ming dynasty exploration ever published in English – which means that no historian writing on why the West rules can afford to ignore it (I’ve found that roughly every third or fourth time I give a public lecture on *Why the West Rules*, someone asks me about Commander Menzies’ thesis).

 But what I actually say in my book about *1421* is very different from what Professor Duchesne implies that I say. On p. 410, after explaining why pretty much no professional historians believe the arguments in *1421*, I add that ‘to my mind Menzies’s *1421* is on a par with von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods*?’ (p. 410). Just in case anyone should interpret this as meaning that I am in fact drawing on Menzies’ work, I turn on p. 420 to his *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance*, the sequel to *1421*. ‘Menzies’s *1434*’, I say there, ‘calls for even more suspension of disbelief than his *1421* … and once again I must confess that this is more suspension than I can muster’. I then state categorically (especially on p. 413) that Zheng He’s fleets did not sail to the Americas (let alone to the North Pole, Antarctica, and Italy). How anyone could read these statements and then conclude that I am ‘Drawing on Gavin Menzies’ discredited book’ is a mystery to me. So far as I know, Professor Duchesne is the only reader to have reached such a conclusion.

 If I were to reply in this much detail to each one of Professor Duchesne’s criticisms this response would end up being even longer than his review, but I would like to touch on a couple more examples. Professor Duchesne says that ‘Morris gladly limits the history of *Europe* to a rather insignificant role until the 18th century … Ancient Greece, Rome, medieval Christendom, the Renaissance, Reformation, the Cartographic Revolution, the Scientific Era, the French Revolution are all summarily treated as local affairs, if not ignored completely’.

 This judgment surprised me on several counts, but most of all because one of my main arguments is that Gibbon was right: the Roman Empire of the first two centuries CE was the richest, most sophisticated, and frankly most important society in the whole of preindustrial history, and that its fall was an ‘awful revolution … which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth’. (1) Between about 500 BCE and 200 CE, I argue, southern Europe was the most developed place on earth. Its history was not insignificant, was not a local affair, and is not something I ignore completely. Contrary to the consensus that has emerged since the 1970s, that late antiquity saw not the fall of the Roman Empire but its transformation into an Early Medieval world, it seems to me (as it does to many archaeologists) that the empire’s collapse was a catastrophe. I dwell on this theme particularly in chapter 11.

 Professor Duchesne grumbles that ‘Morris never uses the words ‘distinctive’ or ‘uniquely’ in reference to
Europe except in a sardonic way.’ Since I have an electronic text of my book, I was able to do a word search, and found that Professor Duchesne is mistaken. It turned out that I didn’t use either of these words very often in the book (perhaps a telling detail about my view of history!). On p. 449, though, I do observe that 16th-century Western Europe was distinct from the other complex societies of Eurasia in remaining free of domination by great empires (to my mind, a good thing). On p. 498, I comment that Britain’s ‘industrial revolution was unique in how much and how fast it drove up social development’ (in my book, also good thing). I argue on p. 506 that Victorian social reformers were revolutionaries (although admittedly I don’t use the words distinctive or unique) in thinking that it was a good idea to ban child labor from factories, restrict working hours for the under-13s, and give all children some schooling. I contrast this explicitly with 19th-century China, where none of these things happened. There’s also no shortage of passages where I scatter around words like ‘first’ and ‘original’ with reference to Europe. These passages are concentrated in chapters five, six, and eight to ten, but that’s because these were the periods (basically, the classical, early-modern, and modern) when Europeans really were being first and original.

Professor Duchesne seems unhappy that the man he rather dismissively calls ‘Zhu Xi, a Confucian ‘theorist’ of the 12th century’, gets more space in chapter eight than Machiavelli or Michelangelo. But how else could it be in a book comparing Western and Eastern history? I’m not sure how people calculate such things, but it’s commonly said that Zhu is the second most influential thinker in Chinese history, behind Confucius but ahead of Mao. Zhu is regularly either praised for perfecting Confucian thought or blamed for condemning China to stagnation (or both at once). Machiavelli was a great man, and so was Michelangelo, but I’ve never heard it suggested that either of them was the second most influential thinker in European history.

I could go on, but that would quickly get repetitive. I will limit myself to one last example, to which Professor Duchesne devotes seven paragraphs. He quotes my comment (p. 473) that the 18th-century Chinese intellectual trend known as kaozheng (‘evidential research’) ‘paralleled Western Europe’s scientific revolution in every way – except one: it did not develop a mechanical model of nature’. Professor Duchesne says that he disagrees strongly. ‘Searching for the sources [Morris] relied on,’ he says, ‘I was led to Benjamin Elman’s From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China (1984), and then to the same author’s In Their Own Terms. Professor Elman is indeed the scholar whose works I found most helpful when I was thinking about early-modern Chinese science; and, after reading these books, Professor Duchesne concluded that ‘Elman does not argue that this philological movement [i.e., kaozheng] contained the elements of modern Western science.’

And neither do I. My point on pp. 473–4 is that despite formal similarities between Chinese and European interest in emphasizing facts over speculation, testing theories against data, and rejecting arbitrary authority, Chinese thinkers in the 17th and 18th centuries did not even begin moving toward modern natural science. The reason for this, I argue, is that despite all their learning, Chinese scientists did not develop mechanical models of nature. And the reason for that was that unlike Europeans, whose involvement with burgeoning empires of trade around the Atlantic kept thrusting new questions about nature onto them, Chinese thinkers went on refining their answers to old questions. The apparently small fact that European thinkers came up with a mechanical model of nature while Chinese thinkers did not is the key to understanding the East-West scientific divergence of the last four centuries; and Professor Duchesne’s discussion of recent books on early-modern Chinese science, while it is interesting, has nothing to do with the argument in my book.

I am sure I am not the first author who, on confronting a negative review, has wondered what could have inspired a fellow-professional to come to such peculiar conclusions. If I might be permitted a little speculation, my guess is that the root problem is that Professor Duchesne is not very interested in what my book actually says.

My suspicion (again, I am necessarily guessing here) is that having just published a book of his own about the Western cultural tradition, Professor Duchesne was looking for a relativistic, multiculturalist, and anti-Western diatribe to serve as a whipping boy.

There is certainly no shortage of such diatribes out there, but my book is not one of them. My book did,
though, have the word ‘West’ in the title, appear at the right moment, offer a different analysis of Western history from Professor Duchesne’s, and garner some media attention. So, I suspect, Professor Duchesne decided to turn a review of my book into a vehicle for denouncing relativism, multiculturalism, and the enemies of the West.

This, I concede again, is just speculation, but to my mind it would explain why Professor Duchesne begins his review not with a summary of my arguments but with complaints about what other people think about my book, why he consistently concludes that my words mean the opposite of what they say, and why he descends so often to _ad hominem_ attacks. I am, he says, ‘defeatist’, ‘ethno-masochistic’, ‘dismissive, even contemptuous, of ordinary people’, and ‘a Party intellectual who knows in which direction the evidence must be altered to fit with the multicultural line’. (2) I am also a megalomaniac: the ultimate message I am trying to convey, Professor Duchesne concludes, is that ‘only Morris can prevent humanity from destroying itself’.

If an undergraduate handed me an essay containing statements like these, I would strike them out and return the paper with a little lecture about professionalism. I have to confess to some disappointment that the editors of _Reviews in History_ did not apply similar standards. A serious issue does distinguish Professor Duchesne’s thinking about the West from mine, but it is not defeatism, masochism, or megalomania; it is whether material or cultural explanations fit better with the facts. If the editors had encouraged Professor Duchesne to write a 9,000-word review focusing on this serious question, it would have been well worth reading.

I’d like to close with a few words about what I would have said if Professor Duchesne had in fact written a more serious review. My main point, I think, would have been that any explanation of why the West rules has to be comparative. We can only answer the question by thinking about how, and how much, the West differs from other societies. This is why I think Professor Duchesne is misguided when he keeps saying that I devoted too much space to China and should have focused more on Europe. Focusing on Europe is fine if the only thing we want to do is to celebrate European accomplishments, but comparisons are necessary to explain European accomplishments.

But comparison is only the first step. A debate about why the West rules also needs to be structured around an explicit analytical framework. This is why I remain unmoved by the lists of eminent Greek philosophers, Renaissance men, and 18th-century novelists that stud Professor Duchesne’s review. The lists certainly display his erudition, but they are analytically pointless. It would be easy to make lists of eminent Persian, Indian, or East Asian thinkers, or to make lists of villains, bunglers, and monsters from the same regions of the world. If the listing is to serve any purpose, there must first be an explicit framework that compels rival analysts either to confront each other on the same ground, using the same terms, or to argue directly about what the appropriate ground for confrontation might be.

This is why I proposed an index of social development in _Why the West Rules – For Now_. The index does not make discussions more objective – far too many assumptions are involved in calculating each of the scores for that – but it does make the discussion more explicit. Designing the index forced me to define exactly what I was measuring and how I measured it, which I explain in an 80,000-word technical appendix called _Social Development_ that can be downloaded as a pdf from my web site [http://www.ianmorris.org](http://www.ianmorris.org) [1]. Critics who find my definitions and methods unconvincing can then use my explicit definitions to show what I have done wrong and to improve on it.

My explanation for why the West rules may be mistaken, but these methods are the only ones that will produce progress on the question. As I see it, taking a comparative perspective and setting the results within an explicit analytical framework forces us to conclude that neither the focus on European culture that Professor Duchesne recommends nor the multicultural relativism that he tries to find in my book explains why the West rules. The answers lie in the sensible middle ground.
Notes


2. Fighting talk; when I migrated to the United States I solemnly swore that I was not, and had never been, a member of the Communist Party (I am assuming, of course, that the communists are the party to which Professor Duchesne thinks I belong). My grandfather, however, had been a long-time card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He was a steelworker rather than an intellectual cadre, but all the same, I heard more than enough from him about the Party to last me a lifetime. Back to (2)

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