

The Rise of Western Power: a Comparative History of Western Civilization

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Jonathan Daly's massive book will serve as a tonic for those anxious that the western world is slipping. It will serve as a red flag for specialists in the history of just about everywhere else, in the unlikely event they read beyond chapter one. As a story of innovation and achievement in the history of the West, this is a fine book, with many insightful passages and interesting details. As a comparative history, it is peppered with intellectual disasters. Fortunately the comparative bits amount to no more than about 10 per cent of the text.

The first thing to note about Daly's effort is its sheer mass. It includes 404 pp. of small-print text, followed by 116 pp. of notes and then a bibliography of some 1,900 references. Daly cannot be faulted for industriousness. It appears that either he or his publisher hopes for an audience that includes the segment of the general public that takes part in book clubs: each chapter ends with a handful of 'questions for reflection'. Each begins with a timeline of events. Whether the book-club public has the necessary stamina for Daly's book is an open question.

Daly begins with a prologue in which he explains that he will answer the perennial question of the rise of the modern West in a comparative framework. He reviews the answers given by some of his many predecessors, dividing them mainly into those who found the answer in geography and those who found it in culture. He does not offer his own answer here. He tries to adopt a neutral tone about the relative merits of civilizations, saying (p. xviii) 'Far be it from me, however, to suggest or imply that the West's unique emergence to preeminence in the modern age overshadowed the achievements of other human cultures ... In other words, the great non-Western cultures have value both for their obvious influence on the emergence of the modern world and for their intrinsic worth as extraordinarily successful human ventures'. So far, so good.

In chapter one he takes several wrong turns. He gallops through prehistory, the ancient Near East, the classical world, ancient China, and a few other civilizations or cultures deemed worthy of attention. Everywhere Daly is looking for evidence of innovation, which he regards as the key to success (which presumably – Daly does not say – means the accumulation of wealth and power). In the two paragraphs devoted to the ancient Near East, we learn that in its societies 'something was missing', because they stagnated after some undefined point prior to the mysterious invasions of the Sea Peoples about 1200 BCE

(pp. 6–7). His tight focus on innovation allows him to jog through ancient Greek and Roman history in a few paragraphs, emphasizing Greek philosophical innovation (mainly rationality) and Roman law. These societies apparently were not missing something.

By p. 10 he is on to China, and its record of innovations. That takes one page, followed by three more that seek to explain why, as he sees it, China stopped innovating after the northern Song (which fell in 1127), and why its ‘greatest inventions, printing, gunpowder, the compass transformed the world, but not China’ (p. 11). He proceeds to compare China’s ‘contributions to world history’ (p. 13) against those of the Greeks and Romans, and finds China wanting. China, it seems, did not give rise to a philosophical system (as the Greeks did) that in turn ‘fueled anything as momentous as the Scientific Revolution’ (p. 13). Nor did it have civil law or spread Christianity as did Rome (pp. 13–14). China’s lack of innovation after the northern Song is explained by its elites devoting their energies to literary pursuits, aiming to qualify for the civil service.

One can almost hear one’s Chinese history colleagues groaning as one reads these pages. Daly is engaged in a comparative exercise that in effect likens the trajectories of civilizations to a horse race. China got off to a good start from the Qin to the Song, thanks to ‘its enormous population’ and ‘good communications’, but then slowed. Europe was sluggish out of the gate but came on strong in the backstretch and approached the finish with a punishing kick. In making his comparisons, Daly relies on implicit yardsticks, the merit of which he does not discuss. Civil law, it seems, is a great contribution to world history, but Confucian thought rather less so. The spread of Christianity is a great contribution to world history, but that of Buddhism apparently is not. China history colleagues could easily write the reverse, in which the Chinese innovations are great contributions and European ones not.

India’s contributions to world history consist largely of Buddhism and mathematics, which Daly judges ‘may almost have equaled China’s’ (p. 14). Byzantium merits three sentences for its greatest contributions to world history, which were preserving ancient Greek learning and ‘shielding Europe from attacks by crusaders of ... Islam’ (p. 15). Islamic civilization is credited with contributions to world history perhaps even greater than China’s, in the form of preservation of Greek thought and innovations in science – chemistry, medicine, optics, and astronomy – and mathematics (pp. 15–19). Making these sorts of comparisons, while always interesting, is best done with carefully selected and intellectually justifiable yardsticks.

Perhaps aware that his pages might be judged as unfairly dismissive, Daly assures us again (all on p. 19) that ‘Each [civilization] achieved wonders of originality and inventiveness expressing its particular values and ways of life ... Every people and culture on earth has achieved miracles of adaptation and innovation. Each deserves the profound and undying respect of every thinking person’. And to drive the point home: ‘people the world over possess impressive levels of creativity and intelligence’. But time and again his account leaves readers with the impression that European achievements (or contributions to the modern world) count for more than anyone else’s. His handling of specific examples often undercuts his general pronouncements.

To give an adequate sense of how Daly praises various cultures only to damn them I will quote – in full – his remarks on pre-Columbian America (pp. 20–1):

‘The South and Central American peoples made some important advances, entirely independent of the world’s other great core areas, including pictographic writing from at least 500 B.C., sophisticated calendars, the concept of numeric ‘zero’ (before the East Indians), and formidable social efficiency. Great civilizations arose: the Maya, Inca, and Aztec. Indigenous peoples domesticated a wide variety of plants (and a few animals), probably their greatest legacy to world civilization: corn, potatoes, squash, beans, cocoa, tomatoes, peppers, rubber trees, and many others. They also imparted to Europeans ideals of living in harmony with nature. In recent times, the Latin American peoples have strongly influenced worldwide popular culture with innovative musical styles popular the world over like salsa, mambo, samba, bossa nova, tango,

merengue, and rumba, culminating in the Latin Pop Explosion of the late 1990s. The continent's north-south geographic orientation impeded development. Yet their contributions would surely have been greater had contact with pathogens carried by Europeans not ravaged their populations and cultures'.

This mish-mash of great achievements, supposed contributions to European thought, and handicaps is all he has to say about the pre-Columbian Americas. A quarter of the passage is about modern pop music. Concerning domesticated plants, one of the examples is wrong: pre-Columbian peoples did not domesticate rubber trees although they harvested latex from them.

Mongols, Jews, and Japanese round out the roster of peoples whose contributions to world history merit assessment in chapter one. After one additional assurance that 'thousands of other peoples throughout the world ... have for centuries astonished scholars and amateur observers with extraordinary displays of ingenuity, daring, perseverance and creativity', which observation he supports by mention of canoes, kayaks, snowshoes and boomerangs, Daly gets to the heart of the matter as he sees it: 'the explosion of innovation achieved in Europe' (p. 24). Chapter one, in short, with its quick comparisons that come across as dismissive, whatever Daly's intent, should be kept away from impressionable readers and tarnishes the book.

The remaining 13 chapters provide a detailed history of innovations and advances in European and United States history. The rest of the world appears from time to time as the source of one or another contribution that Europeans or Americans adopted and carried to greater heights, or as not measuring up to Western standards. Daly remains true to his emphasis on innovation and novelty: 25 chapters or sub-chapters feature the word 'revolution' or 'revolutionary'.

These 13 chapters devoted to the West's innovations and achievements begin with one on the medieval centuries. Its topics include: agricultural revolution, rise of feudalism, urban revolution, technological innovations, commercial revolution, cathedral building, literary flowering, the status of women, music, culture and art – more or less standard fare. But it too engages in invidious comparison. In a passage typical of Daly's approach (p. 44), he finds Gothic cathedrals preferable to 'the grandest buildings of the other great civilizations' which were 'cramped, narrow, and divided into numerous stories like Japanese and Chinese pagodas, or relatively low-lying, albeit at times immensely and beautifully adorned, like the most splendid mosques'. Some pagodas might be taller than cathedrals, he admits, but 'these towers and spires cannot rival the magic of experiencing Gothic churches'. Buddhist stupas were 'mostly closed on all sides' whereas cathedrals 'welcomed worshipers into a soaring unified space, often tinted with myriad hues when light streamed in through thousands of square feet of brightly colored stained glass' producing a 'stunning' aesthetic experience.

Now Daly is entitled to prefer cathedrals to mosques, pagodas, and stupas (I generally share that preference). But to compare them in such a way as to imply, strongly, that cathedrals are on some objective measure preferable to stupas, pagodas, and mosques is to adopt a provincial outlook no more logical than stating that cats are better than dogs (or dogs better than cats). The tallest cathedrals might be taller than the tallest mosques – but if mere height is not meaningful when it comes to pagodas vs. cathedrals, why does it matter in a comparison of mosques and cathedrals? One could equally say that many mosques have elegant fountains, whereas cathedrals have only puny baptismal fonts, that many mosques have fabulously colorful carpets, whereas cathedrals have cold, unwelcoming, hard stone floors, and that big mosques have either four or six soaring minarets, whereas big cathedrals have only one or at best two spires. By choosing one's yardstick, one can find reasons to prefer cathedrals to mosques or mosques to cathedrals. (Curiously, on p. 277 Daly returns to the comparison of cathedrals and pagodas, but here seems agnostic about which buildings 'bespeak a more creative or refined culture').

The following chapters take up changes, usually revolutionary changes, in the medieval papacy and church, early modern military affairs, overseas explorations, printing, the church again (the Reformation), science, commerce, and politics. This takes us up to about 1800. Then Daly offers two 19th-century chapters on

industry and technology, and two on the 20th, one on crises (imperialism and wars) and one on social change.

I found these chapters impressive and interesting for the most part. I had not known patent law was pioneered in Venice in 1474, or that the Lutheran Church in Sweden made literacy a requirement for marriage in 1686 – to take only two of a 100 or more fascinating and significant details that I underlined in my copy. The potted treatments of subjects such as Italian humanism, the Reformation, and the Russian Revolution – and many others – struck me as well done. Next time I lecture to freshmen on these subjects, I might well return to Daly's pages as part of my preparation.

Moreover, in these chapters Daly is not blind to horrors in the history of the West. He gives slavery, imperialist violence, the Holocaust and other grim episodes their due. Indeed he refrains from emphasizing that other world civilizations also featured slavery, brutality, and discrimination, and the record of the West in bad behavior is scarcely distinctive.

That said, some historians will take issue with Daly's distribution of attention. Many will find his Europe skewed towards northwestern Europe and Britain (although his specialization is Russian history). For example, in the discussion of the evolution of self-government (pp. 247–72) he includes lengthy treatments of developments in Britain, the United States, and France, preceded by quick sketches of Italian republics, Swiss cantons, and the Netherlands. Poland and its tradition of self-governing elites does not rate a mention. I thought he might have made more of the demographic, fertility, and health revolutions in the modern West, which he dispatches in 30 words (p. 375), fewer than he accords to the rise of informality in the United States in the 1960s. There are passages where the parade of innovations degenerates into a catalogue, as when one comes upon a paragraph that begins: 'The next important figure in the advance of chemistry was Paracelsus' (p. 195).

These are quibbles. The disasters come when Daly inserts comparative observations, almost always showing the West in a favorable light and often on dubious premises. So, for example (p. 199), in his discussion of the Scientific Revolution in Europe, he writes that 'Scholars and thinkers of the other great cultures of the world also [in addition to those of Islam] remained isolated, stifled, and largely unproductive'. This is a harsh judgment, and one that specialists in the intellectual history of China or Iran, I expect, would vigorously dispute. In a passage on the status of women in the West (p. 372), he notes '[t]hey suffered no enforced debilitations like the traditional Chinese foot-binding practice and were not expected to throw themselves upon the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands as in India'. Among the troubles with this sentence is that *sati* claimed well under one per cent of women in India at any given time. The only real evidence we have about the prevalence of widow-burning in India comes from the early 19th century, and it suggests a few hundred women -- out of perhaps 100 million females in India -- per year met their end this way. Many more women underwent foot-binding in China, although whether that was 'enforced' or not is a matter of controversy. In another unfortunate passage, Daly retails a vision of unchanging China in a comparison between reactions to the carnage of the First World War and of the Taiping Rebellion; the latter in his view did not raise questions about culture and values in China (p. 340). Such a view is hard to square with the debates among Chinese intellectuals in the late 19th century about the proper course for China and the Qing Empire.

Although he gives a few hints along the way, Daly saves most of the answer to his question – why the West – for the conclusion. The West's rise can be dated to the time of Charlemagne (p. 61). The reasons for it include 'an unprecedented ability to manage and share information, to unlock the secrets of nature, to coordinate human activity, to foster and intensify individual initiative, to discover and adapt diverse ideas and resources, and to build and maintain institutions that promote all of these things' (p. 336). A consistent reason that helps explain all the others is the political fragmentation of Europe (not a novel argument but among Daly's best). He summarizes (p. 398) this as follows: 'First, after the fall of Rome, no rulers established long-term political dominance. Second, individuals, communities, associations, institutions, and societies throughout the West emerged as bulwarks of order and agents opposed to the countervailing forces of warlordism, absolutism, authoritarianism, dictatorship, and totalitarianism. A political stalemate, an

extraordinary balance of powers, resulted. Consequently, no European polity had the power to fully dominate its society’.

The secret sauce of the West had other ingredients as well. Daly writes: ‘More than other civilizations, it invested humans with rights and liberties, evolved an ethics of toleration, emphasized the rule of law, developed institutions of political participation and self-government, endowed individuals and communities with spiritual authority, created institutions and procedures for building up and sharing information ... These very qualities, and only they, I have argued, can explain the West’s modern success’ (p. 402). In explaining the origin of these important qualities, Daly offers only one ultimate source, although his choice of words suggests there might be others: ‘Why and how did these qualities emerge? Presumably the Christian faith was a key factor ... As shown throughout this book, Christian faith, spiritual movements and institutional religion contributed powerfully, if only thanks to major struggles, to the development of values that most people today would consider essential to the flourishing of the West – tolerance, openness, a spirit of innovation, the affirmation of the sacred value of each human person, and the search for truth that accords with science and experience’ (p. 402).

The book ends with a final worry and a final reassurance. In a passage that reminded me of some of Toynbee’s late-in-life apologia for Christianity, Daly, after some remarks on loss of faith here and there, wonders ‘if it will be possible to inspire and undergird continued Western development within a framework of [environmental] sustainability without such a comprehensive and coherent religious and philosophical vision?’ (p. 403). Fortunately, as Daly sees it, whichever regions or countries prosper most in the future will ‘maintain, adopt, or adapt the Western recipe for success – decentralized authority, the affirmation of individual rights and liberty, the pursuit of truth in all its forms, toleration of differences, the rule of law, respect for property, openness to novelty, and unimpeded access to information and knowledge’ (p. 404). So the secret sauce will survive among the winners of world history’s horse race, whoever they might be.

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