

INTRODUCTION

THE RISE OF THE WEST?

In the Introduction, the author discusses the topic of the book, and how others have approached it. The book addresses the large question of "how did the modern world—the one that we live in—come into being?" The modern world, according to the author, consists of many things, but he is especially interested in how the world became an industrial one, organized politically into nation states with a substantial history of warfare, and marked by a large and growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest parts of the world.

Most previous explanations of the the origins of the modern world have focused on Europe and the storyline of "the rise of the West" because for the last 150-200 years, Europeans have in fact dominated the world. That led historians and others to search within Europe for the reasons for European dominance, giving rise to various theories about the extent to which Europe was a special, unique case in world history. These are "Eurocentric" explanations of the origins of the modern world.

Recent scholarship on East Asia, India, Africa, and the Middle East, however has raised significant doubts about Eurocentric explanations. Rather, the new scholarship suggests a different storyline in which most of the Old World from Asia to Europe was broadly comparable until 1750 or 1800, without one part being any more likely than another to break through to an industrial revolution. That it was ultimately Great Britain rather than China or Japan had to do more with luck and the outcomes of other historical forces.

Key Terms/Vocabulary

globalization	"the rise of the West"	diffusionism
G7	smallpox	European
industry	progress	exceptionalism
nation state	Adam Smith	"European miracle"
WTO (World Trade Organization)	Thomas Malthus	Middle Ages
IMF (International Monetary Fund)	David Ricardo	Asia
NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	Karl Marx	Europe
	Max Weber	Eurasia
	Orient	Eurocentrism
	modernization theory	ethnocentrism

myth
paradigm
historical narrative
master narrative

contingency
inevitability
historical accident
conjuncture

monocausal explanation
agrarian empire
unit of analysis
polycentric world

Study Questions for the Introduction

A. The big questions for the Introduction are these:

1. What is a "Eurocentric" version of the origins of the modern world?
2. What is a "non-Eurocentric" version of the origins of the modern world?
3. How are they similar, and how do they differ?
4. Why does the author of this book choose a non-Eurocentric narrative?

B. The following questions build up to and inform the big questions:

1. What is the story of "the rise of the West"?
2. What does "the gap" refer to, and what explanations have been offered to explain it?
3. When does the period of modern history typically begin? What events usually are taken as markers of the beginning of the modern period?
4. Why should we care about these questions? About history? What difference does it make whether we know anything at all about the past, let alone whether the stories about it are Eurocentric or not?
5. To what extent is Eurocentrism a "myth"? In what ways is it like *The Matrix* or the TV set on *The Truman Show*?
6. How does Eurocentrism differ from ethnocentrism?
7. How can there be non-Eurocentric explanations of a modern world that has been dominated by Europe?

8. How does a view of history that is "contingent" differ from one that sees what happened as inevitable?
9. Why do China and India have large roles to play in this history?
10. What does it mean to say that the world prior to about 1800 was "polycentric"?

Map exercise: Examine a map or globe, and find the longitude lines (the ones that run north-south). Find "0" longitude, the "prime meridian." What parts of the world does it run through? Which country do you think was able to define the prime meridian as starting in their land? Why? What difference does it make? Examine Map 2.1 (pp. 44-45), and compare the center of that map to one that is centered on the prime meridian. Why is the map in the book centered differently?

Additional Web Sites to Explore

[The American Historical Association](#)

[H-Net](#)

[H-World](#)

[Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory](#)

[The Association for Asian Studies](#)

[Critical Asian Studies](#)

[Library of Congress Home Page](#)