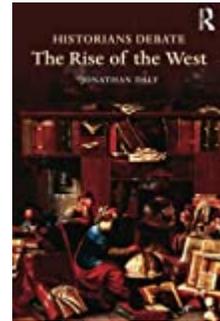




**Jonathan W. Daly.** *Historians Debate the Rise of the West.* London and New York: Routledge, 2014. ix + 190 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-138-77481-0.



**Reviewed by** Sarah Nicklas (Northeastern University)

**Published on** H-World (August, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Aaron D. Whelchel (Washington State University-Vancouver)

Despite its emphasis on global processes and interactions, world history has often centered on the dominance of the West. Recent scholarship has critiqued this trend and, in doing so, has tried to explain why the West has risen to prominence over the East. In *Historians Debate the Rise of the West*, Jonathan Daly explores this trend by analyzing the diverse publications in the field. He centers his analysis around the question, Why did the West and not China become the dominant global power? By providing an extensive review of the literature, Daly attempts to put forth an objective examination of this highly contested debate.

*Historians Debate the Rise of the West* is divided into five chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter discusses different schools of thought about why the West became the preeminent global leader. Within each chapter, Daly refers to various prominent academics in the field and synthesizes their arguments. Daly does not provide his own analysis; however he does provide a detailed look at the leading historical scholarship. This helps the reader grasp significant arguments in the field and provides a strong foundation for understanding the debate.

The first chapter explores scholarship arguing that

the West rose to dominance due to internal factors such as cultural traits, technological strength, and a politically fragmented system. Numerous authors emphasize the role of a Judeo-Christian culture as a major factor in the emergence of Western dominance. Under this argument, Christianity provided structure for the community and prevented lawlessness and materialism. Furthermore, the church helped form government institutions and principles such as the balance of power and rule of law. In addition to Christian values, Daly cites various scholars who stress the importance of Europe's philosophy of individualism and technological sophistication. This atmosphere of individualism combined with the fragmented political structure of Europe drove competition, which in turn strengthened technological innovation and increased capital accumulation. Referencing Michael Roberts and Geoffrey Parker, Daly writes, "A key element in Europe's success ... was the intensity of competition among states that drove each constantly to innovate and to imitate and build on its rivals' advances in technology, tactics, and strategy" (p. 39). According to several scholars, this was uniquely European and was the main reason why Europe developed into a global leader.

While the first chapter focuses on internal attributes leading to eventual dominance, chapters 2 through 4 ana-

lyze external factors contributing to Western ascendancy. Concentrating on the roles of geography, capitalist exploitation, and emulating Asian innovations, these chapters frame Europe's rise to power in the context of its relationship with Asia and other regions in the global arena. Chapter 2 reviews the importance of geography, and whether Europe had a geographic advantage over China. The authors in this section seek to minimize the dominant Eurocentric analysis that has plagued historical explanations of the past. William McNeill, Jared Diamond, and E. L. Jones emphasize the importance of connections between cultures as well as geographic features in driving Europe's rise to ascendancy. Chapter 3 moves away from geographic advantages and analyzes the role of capitalism and the colonial project. Drawing from Marx, Daly surveys the scholarship regarding imperialism and how the exploitation of labor benefited Europe, with particular emphasis on dependency theory and world-systems theory. Selections from Andre Gunder Frank, Joseph Inikori, and Immanuel Wallerstein each examine how economic structures helped facilitate European power. In addition to various strategies of financial procurement, Daly also considers how land development affected the global power structure. He references Europe's "domestication" of agriculture as a main component of European dominance; through its colonial project, Europe expanded Western husbandry on a global scale. This process, coupled with the spread of Western notions of property rights, significantly boosted Europe's economy. Referring to Alfred Crosby, Daly writes, "property rights, made it possible to transform land and other natural resources into objects to buy and sell—in other words, commodities" (p. 78). Chapter 4 differs from the previous sections by more closely reviewing Europe's relationship with Asia, stating that it was one of exploitation and the cooptation of Asian economic and technological methods by Western powers. Daly writes, "this chapter investigates scholars who argue either that everything Europe achieved was made possible by Asia or that the great Asian cultures continued to outperform the European economies and societies until well into the nineteenth century—*or both*" (p. 102). Referring to Gunder-Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz, and John Hobson, the chapter describes the social, economic, ecological, and cultural reasons that encouraged Europe to imitate Asian traditions.

Chapter 5 serves as the "dialectical counterpart to the central focus of this book" (p. 10) and centers on Chi-

nese social, economic, and political development. Scholars in this section examine different factors relating to why China is not the global leader considering its international dominance throughout most of the second millennium. Daly writes, "China was probably the most inventive and technologically advanced society in pre-modern times, the longest-lasting great empire in history, and by far the world's richest, most populous, and most powerful country until a couple of centuries ago" (p. 135). Authors such as Joel Mokyr, Joseph Needham, and Wen-yuan Qian analyze this question by examining various factors, including the role of technology, centralized government, a large population resulting in a substantial work force, and China's reliance on agriculture. The main theme that runs throughout this chapter is the importance of population size and how it affected labor costs and innovation. It argues that China's large workforce resulted in inexpensive labor, helping maintain social and political stability. While China had a consistent flow of affordable human labor, Europe did not, resulting in relatively higher labor costs. Thus, Europe invested in developing cost-saving technologies, allowing it to accumulate more capital. Citing Kent Deng, Daly writes, "This structural equilibrium [in China] kept the peasants from leaving the land and thus from providing a flexible labor supply for industrial development and forestalled further growth of the market economy" (p. 173). What is clear from the scholarship reviewed in this chapter is that there are numerous and complex explanations for why China fell behind while Europe advanced.

*Historians Debate the Rise of the West* provides an in-depth consideration of important scholarship pertaining to the West's current dominant global position. Daly includes a comprehensive literature review and summarizes complicated explanations into understandable arguments. Importantly, Daly does not favor one particular reason why the West rose; rather, he covers a multitude of works—often contrasting with each other—that explain the current global power structure. While this provides an extensive review of the field, unfortunately Daly does not contribute his own analysis. By doing so he could have furthered the debate on why the West rose to power over the East. Instead, he presents the most common and important opinions and allows readers to judge the various arguments on their own. In this respect, Daly achieves his goal of synthesizing the dominant threads in this debate.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

**Citation:** Sarah Nicklas. Review of Daly, Jonathan W., *Historians Debate the Rise of the West*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. August, 2015.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44654>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.