Ferguson and The Printing Press:

According to Niall Ferguson:

… a more decisive breakthrough than the Renaissance was the advent of the Reformation and the ensuing fragmentation of Western Christianity after 1517. This was in large measure because of the revolutionary role of the printing press, surely the single most important technological innovation of the period before the Industrial Revolution.

But how, according to Ferguson, does the printing press allow the West to dominate the world since 1500?

The printing press with movable type is traditionally credited to fifteenth-century Germany. Specifically, its invention is attributed to Johannes Gutenberg around 1440. In reality it was invented in eleventh-century China. Paper too originated in China long before it was introduced in the West. So did paper money, wallpaper and toilet paper.

But Gutenberg’s system of movable metal type was more flexible and scalable than anything developed in China. As he said, ‘the wondrous agreement, proportion and harmony of punches and types’ allowed for the very rapid production of pamphlets and books.

It was far too powerful a technology to be monopolized (as Gutenberg hoped it could be). Within just a few years of his initial breakthrough in Mainz, presses had been established by imitators.

No author benefited from this explosion of publication more than Martin Luther, not least because he saw the potential of writing in the vernacular rather than in Latin.

Citation:

1. Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and The Rest.* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 60.