

The Six Best of the West:
A Report on *Civilization* by Niall Ferguson



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Civilization: The West and the Rest is historian Niall Ferguson's most recent work. Penguin Books published the paperback edition in New York City in the year 2011. The book gives a chronicle of Western civilization's ascendancy following the 15th century C.E. in 325 pages, which is rather brief considering the expansiveness of his topic. *Civilization* is dedicated to Ferguson's current wife Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whom he considers to "[understand] better than anyone I know, what Western civilization really means – and what it still has to offer the world."¹

Born in Glasgow, Scotland April 18th, 1964, Niall Ferguson has become a prolific historian through written media and film. He received his undergraduate degree from Magdalen College at Oxford University with full honours in 1985. He then spent two years as a Hanseatic Scholar in Berlin and Hamburg.² After his time in Germany, Ferguson repatriated to Britain and joined the Research Fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge, before returning to his alma mater, Oxford, to become a Fellow and Tutor in Modern History at Jesus College - a position that he held for eight years (1992-2000).³ In the beginning of the 21st century, Ferguson spent time as a professor at Oxford and then at New York University, until 2004 when he was appointed Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University and William Ziegler Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.⁴ Niall Ferguson's achievements in the literary world are equally impressive, having published a total of eleven books, many of which have received critical acclaim, and contributes weekly to the magazine *Newsweek*.⁵ Several of his books have been adapted into television documentaries, and one of which, *The Ascent of Money*, won an Emmy Award for Best Documentary in 2009. A feature-length documentary based on Ferguson's interviews with Henry Kissinger was also highly praised, receiving the Best Documentary Award at the 2011 New York Film Festival.⁶ In 2004, for his

reputation as a prolific historian, Ferguson was named to Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People under the category of Scientists and Thinkers.⁷

Niall Ferguson organizes his book around what he calls the “Six Killer Apps” of Western Civilization; i.e., the six major institutions that propelled the West into its dominant position on the World stage. Each “App” is given its own chapter, which is then divided further into subheadings, with four or five within each chapter. These chapters are preceded by a prologue and introduction, and followed by a conclusion. The prologue gives a brief description of why Ferguson felt it was important to write this book at this time; the introduction summarizes the premise of the book, as well as the “Six Killer Apps”; and the conclusion explains Ferguson's prediction about the future of Western Dominance. There are three groups of glossed pages with colour images located throughout the book. The images mostly show artwork mentioned in the writing, or artwork depicting what is discussed in the writing. Graphs and maps relevant to the different topics occur occasionally throughout the book. The last pages of the book are dedicated to an index, endnotes, and a bibliography. *Civilization* is organized in a very logical and easily-followed way, which contributes greatly to the effectiveness of the book.

The purpose of *Civilization* is to answer whether the West will continue to be the vanguard for civilization or if we are experiencing its decline. Ferguson establishes early in the book his firm belief in the importance of knowledge of history in being able to anticipate the future. Thus he sets out to uncover the answer by examining the reasons the West became dominant in the first place. He identifies six institutions developed by the West, which were instrumental in the West's ascent: Competition, Science, Consumerism, Medicine, Property Rights, and Work Ethic. He then proceeds to give an account of their development and later significance in

propelling the West ahead of the Rest. At the same time he examines what is happening concurrently in other civilizations and identifies pitfalls that led to their collapse. Through investigation into the West's ascent and the 'Rest's' descent Niall Ferguson attempts to shed light on the future of the West.

According to Ferguson, the explanation for the West's current position atop the World Stage can be reduced to six institutions that gained prominence in the West in the latter half of the 2nd millennium. He begins with competition, bred in Europe because of its many small independent states. It eventually led to the establishment of colonies and trade, as well as technological innovations. Science is the second institution Ferguson identifies. The scientific method and scientific societies developed during the Scientific Revolution played a key part in giving Western societies an edge over others. Medicine, in Ferguson's view, is one of the most important areas in which science contributed, because it not only granted Westerners a longer lifespan, but also made possible the colonization of tropical regions. Ferguson also speaks of the colonization of the New World. He identifies granting of private property to a large number of people as an essential reason for the stability and success of Britain's colonies in the Americas. Many people consider consumerism and materialism to be among the chief evils of Western society, but Ferguson takes a radically different view. He considers the consumer society of the 19th century, - specifically the insatiable desire for clothes - as essential for sustaining the Industrial Revolution by maintaining the balance of supply and demand. In addition, Ferguson links the spread of Westernization with the spread of Western Fashions. Finally, Ferguson talks about Max Weber's idea of the "Protestant Ethic": the idea that a good work ethic was one of the unintended consequences of the Reformation that propelled

the West. However, the West isn't given all of the credit; Ferguson also mentions factors which led to the decline of the once mighty empires of other parts of the globe.

As Ferguson proceeds through his recount of Western ascendance he also speaks of the great Eastern Empires that existed and goes about explaining why they no longer exist. The fall of the Chinese Ming Dynasty, Ferguson claims, was chiefly due to its contempt for foreign trade and technology. It had become complacent, believing it was superior to all other civilizations. The Ottomans, who had once been in a position to conquer Vienna, the Eastern stronghold of Christendom, wasted away because of a failed and corrupt form of government, combined with a lack of interest in scientific advances. Lack of technology was the largest reason most other civilizations eventually succumbed to the West, militarily or culturally. However, in South America it was the social and political systems that failed. The restriction of land ownership to the privileged few proved an impossible foundation for a stable representative government, as is the lesson from the failed state of Gran Columbia. Through examining these pitfalls that led to the disintegration of states and considering what propelled the West, it is possible to attempt to foretell the future of Western dominance.

Ferguson concludes that the Rest is closing the gap very rapidly, and according to him the Rest's ascent is the story of our time. However, the reason he gives for the Rest's ascent is Westernization, or as he calls it "downloading the Six Killer Apps". The Rest are poised to overtake the West because they are becoming Western, Ferguson argues, and therefore, if one of the "Restern" civilizations were to become dominant it is not a failure of the West, it is just more proof of its success. Ultimately though, Ferguson believes the future of the West lies in the hands of Westerners. Historical ignorance and loss of faith in the Western tradition are

considered by Ferguson to pose the greatest threat to Western dominance. If these can be overcome the West should continue to thrive.

Endnotes

¹ N. Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), xxx.

² *Civilization: Is the West History? - Features - Niall Ferguson Biography - Channel 4*, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/civilization-is-the-west-history/articles/niall-ferguson-biography> (accessed January 8, 2013).

³ *Harvard University History Department - Faculty: Niall Ferguson. Harvard University History Department*, <http://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/faculty/ferguson.php> (accessed January 8, 2013).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ N. Ferguson, *About Niall / Niall Ferguson*, <http://www.niallferguson.com/about> (accessed January 7, 2013).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ M. Elliott, *Niall Ferguson - The 2004 TIME 100 – TIME*, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1970858_1970909_1971694,00.html (accessed January 9, 2013).