

Title—The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Rich and Some are So Poor
Author—David S. Landes
Year—1999

Categories: World History, Economics, Culture

Place: The World

Time: 1492-1990

Argument Synopsis:

The growing gap between rich and poor nations has consumed much attention in scholarly literature, politics, and culture. The question of ‘how did we get here?’ remains prevalent across world historical studies. In *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, David Landes attempts to provide an answer to the question of rampant wealth inequality between nations, while also arguing against the scholarly push against Eurocentric histories. In seeking to answer this question of wealth inequality, Landes attempts to survey the development of modernity on a world historical scale, beginning around the tenth century. Using comparisons with various non-European nations, Landes claims that it is clear that Europe and Western civilization was the key driving force behind global development for the past millennium.

The Wealth and Poverty of Nations is divided into twenty-nine chapters, as well as an introduction, that attempt to track the chronological development of the world, focusing on economic and industrial development. The bulk of the chapters focus on the period following the 1492 discovery of the New World, the period of the European ‘march for civilization.’ Landes argues for the prominent role of Western civilization in response to the growing literature that places China as an equally likely harbinger of modernity, such as Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence*. Acknowledging the rampant critiques of Eurocentrism, Landes argues that he prefers the truth to political correctness.

Landes begins with a discussion of the role of geography in determining the success of nations; he argues that richer countries exist in more temperate zones, where productivity is easier and spread of disease mitigated. The twenty-fifth chapter focuses on the concept of empire and its application throughout world history, arguing that empire is not linked to capitalism, as some scholars posit.

In his attempt to craft a world history that explained the current status of nations in the world economy, Landes produces a Eurocentric history that asserts its Eurocentrism as evidence of its accuracy. Although highlighting non-European innovations throughout the book, such as the Chinese invention of paper and gunpowder, Landes consistently claims that without European exceptionalism none of these would have led to the development of industrial society (perhaps with the exception of Japan). In reaction to the growing anti-Eurocentric and Sinocentric literature, Landes tries to provide an argument as to why the predominance of Eurocentric history is actually the correct path for historians, as he believes that Europe was indeed the driver of modernity and progress. However, his argument reads as grossly Eurocentric, at some points bordering on racist, and thus his book is not convincing and is behind the times.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Eurocentrism is a powerful idea that continues to permeate scholarship
- World history, in particular, can fall victim to the trappings of Eurocentrism