

Title—The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community

Author—William McNeill

Year—1990

Categories: World History, Civilizations, Eurocentrism, Politics

Place: The World

Time: Human History

Argument Synopsis:

William McNeill's *The Rise of the West* attempts to provide an assessment of the whole of human history, with a focus on the role of the West, and Europe specifically, in ushering in modernity and civilization. Although he sets out to provide a world history that reflects the contributions of various cultures, his product, in the end, is very Eurocentric. Thus his goal of creating a world history failed, instead producing a Eurocentric history of the world. This is demonstrated most starkly in the last section of the book entitled "The Era of Western Dominance," which seeks to explore the period of 1500-1950 as the advent of the modern era. According to McNeill, "Western Europe, of course, was the principal gainer from this extraordinary revolution in world relationships, both materially and in a larger sense, for it now became the pre-eminent meeting place for novelties of every kind," (565). It is during this period that he argues is when the West rises to its position of social and political dominance over the world.

In his discussions of the Industrial Revolution, his belief in European exceptionalism is made abundantly clear through his argument on why the Industrial Revolution began in Britain. McNeill posits that industrialization could only have occurred in Britain during the nineteenth century because they had the perfect set of conditions, resources, and knowledge for the development of industry. McNeill claims that the Industrial and Democratic Revolutions of the West changed the entire world directly through interactions with the West; "for the West-center cosmopolitanism arising from the Industrial and Democratic revolutions left no important region of the earth untouched," (789). In his discussion of industrialization vis a vis the West and the Muslim world, he argues there is a fundamental incompatibility between Islamic orthodoxy and modern thought. He identifies the relative success between India and Pakistan claiming that acceptance of Western ideas and practices was easier for Hindus than Muslims. Overall, McNeill's global efforts are stymied by his pervasive Eurocentrism, an issue which he addresses himself in his article "The Rise of the West After 25 Years." When he revisited his magnum opus 25 years later, McNeill was struck by his European biases, which leave the book flawed. He acknowledges the central failures of the book: his failure to acknowledge the importance of China and his assumption that civilizations are the only actors on a world historical scale. McNeill explains his overlooking of China was a result of the biases of his education, which forced him to use a distinctly Western viewpoint. In regards to the question of world scale actors, McNeill acknowledges that his assumption that civilizations alone were justifiable historical actors is flawed. The flaws present in *The Rise of the West* have become illuminated to all, including William McNeill.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Assumes discernibly separate civilizations were the autonomous social entities whose interactions defined history on a global scale
- Assumes a belief in European/Western superiority over the rest of the world
- Contemporary high culture and thought derived almost exclusively from Western cultural traditions