

Imperialism Reclaimed

By [Robert Skidelsky](#)

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History has no final verdicts. Major shifts in events and power bring about new subjects for discussion and new interpretations.

Fifty years ago, as decolonization accelerated, no one had a good word to say for imperialism. It was regarded as unambiguously bad, both by ex-imperialists and by their liberated subjects. Schoolchildren were taught about the horrors of colonialism, how it exploited conquered peoples. There was little mention, if any, of imperialism's benefits.

Then, in the 1980s, a revisionist history came along. It wasn't just that distance lends a certain enchantment to any view. The West — mainly the Anglo-American part of it — had recovered some of its pride and nerve under U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. There was also the growing evidence of post-colonial regimes' failure, violence and corruption, especially in Africa.

But the decisive event for the revisionists was the collapse of the Soviet empire, which not only left the United States as the top dog globally, but also seemed, to the more philosophically minded, to vindicate Western civilization and values against all other

civilizations and values. With the European Union extending its frontiers to embrace many former Communist states, the West became again, if briefly, the embodiment of universal reason, one that was obliged and equipped to spread its values to the still-benighted parts of the world. Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man" testified to this sense of triumph and historical duty.

Such a conjuncture set the stage for a new wave of imperialism, although the reluctance to use the word remained. In doing so, it was bound to affect interpretations of the old imperialism, which was now extolled for spreading economic progress, the rule of law and science and technology to countries that would never have benefited from them otherwise.

Foremost among the new generation of revisionist historians was Niall Ferguson of Harvard University, whose television series has just started showing in Britain. In its first episode, Ferguson appears amid the splendid monuments of China's Ming Dynasty, which, in the 15th century, was undoubtedly the greatest civilization of the day, with its naval expeditions reaching the coasts of Africa. After that, it was all downhill for China and all uphill for the West.

Ferguson summarizes the reasons for this reversal in six "killer apps": competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society and the work ethic. Against such tools — unique products of Western civilization — the rest had no chance. From such a perspective, imperialism, old and new, has had a beneficial influence, because it has been the means of spreading these "apps" to the rest of the world, thereby enabling them to enjoy the fruits of progress hitherto confined to a few Western countries.

Understandably, this thesis has not met with universal approbation. Historian Alex von Tunzelmann accused Ferguson of leaving out all of imperialism's nasty bits: the Black War in Australia, the German genocide in Namibia, the Belgian exterminations in the Congo, the Amritsar Massacre, the Bengal Famine, the Irish potato famine and much else.

But that is the weakest line of attack. Edward Gibbon once described history as being little better than a record of the "crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." Imperialism certainly added its quota to these. But the question is whether it also provided, through Hegel's "cunning of reason," the means to escape from them. Even Marx justified British rule in India on these grounds. Ferguson, too, can make a sound argument for such a proposition.

The most serious weakness in Ferguson's presentation is his lack of sympathy for the civilizations dismissed as "the rest," which also points to the most serious limitation of the revisionist case. The "triumph of the West" that followed the collapse of Communism in Europe was clearly not the "end of history." As Ferguson must know, the main topic of discussion in international affairs nowadays concerns the "rise" of China, and more generally Asia, as well as the stirring of Islam.

Of course, the Chinese may prefer to talk about "restoration" rather than "rise," and point to a "harmonious" pluralism of the future. But "rise" is how most people think of China's recent history, and in history the rise of some is usually associated with the decline of others. In other words, we may be reverting to that cyclical pattern that historians assumed to be axiomatic before the seemingly irreversible rise of the West implanted in them a view of linear progress toward greater reason and freedom.

Europe is plainly in decline, politically and culturally, though most Europeans, blinded by their high living standards and the pretensions of their impotent statesmen, are happy to dress this up as progress. Chinese savings are underwriting much of the U.S. “civilizing mission” that Ferguson applauds. The pattern seems clear: The West is losing dynamism, and the rest are gaining it.

The remainder of this century will show how this shift plays out. For the moment, most of us have lost the historical plot. It is possible, for example, to imagine a “Western world” in which the actual West is no longer the dominant factor. The United States will simply pass the torch to China, as Britain once did to the United States.

But it seems to me extremely unlikely that China, India and “the rest” will simply take over Western values wholesale, for this would amount to renouncing any value in their own civilizations. Some syntheses and accommodations between the West and the rest will inevitably accompany the shift in power and wealth from the former to the latter. The only question is whether the process will be peaceful.

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