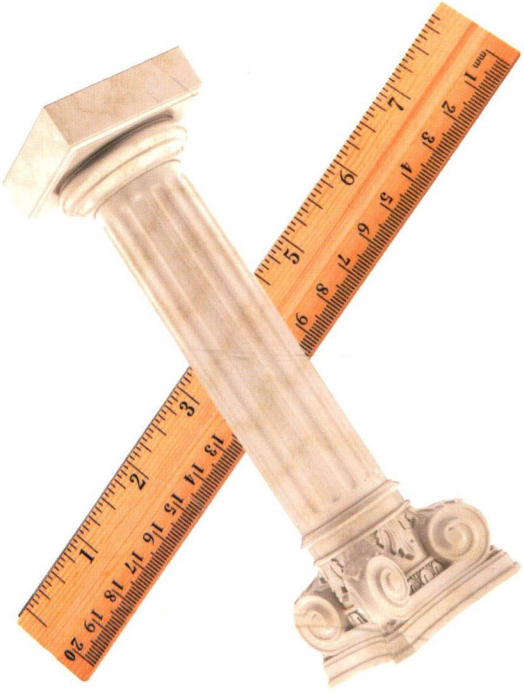
The MEASURE *of* CIVILIZATION

How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations



IAN MORRIS

Author of *Why the West Rules—for Now*

The MEASURE *of* CIVILIZATION

How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations

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藏书章

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The MEASURE *of* CIVILIZATION

For my father

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PREFACE

THE MEASURE OF CIVILIZATION IS A COMPANION VOLUME to my earlier book *Why the West Rules—For Now*. It is a very different kind of book, though. In *Why the West Rules*, I tried to tell the story of social development across the last fifteen thousand years; here, I describe the evidence and methods I used in constructing the index of social development that lay behind that story.

Like many books, this one has grown out of conversations that have been going for years. I was introduced to the idea of social evolution when I was a graduate student at Cambridge (UK) in the early 1980s, and have been talking and thinking about it, in fits and starts, ever since. Along the way I have incurred debts to many people, and I would particularly like to thank Daron Acemoglu, James Anderson, John Bennet, Francesca Bray, Mat Burrows, Ewen Cameron-Watt, John Cherry, Eric Chinski, David Christian, Jack Davis, Stephan de Spiegeliere, Jared Diamond, Al Dien, Tom Gallant, Peter Garnsey, Banning Garrett, Jack Goldstone, Deborah Gordon, Steve Haber, John Haldon, Paul Halstead, Ian Hodder, Agnes Hsu, Parag Khanna, Karla Kierkegaard, Kristian Kristiansen, David Laitin, Michael Lässig, Mark Lewis, Anthony Ling, Li Liu, Angus Maddison, Alessio Magnavacca, Paolo Malanima, Joe Manning, Michael McCormick, Tom McLellan, Joel Mokyr, Suresh Naidu, Reviel Netz, Doug North, Josh Ober, Isaac Opper, Anne Porter, Michael Puett, Kumar Ramakrishna, Anna Razeto, Colin Renfrew, Jim Robinson, Richard Saller, Walter Scheidel, Glenn Schwartz, Hugo Scott-Gall, Steve Shennan, Dan Smail, Vaclav Smil, Larry Smith, Mike Smith, Anthony Snodgrass, Peter Temin, Nick Thomas, Peter Turchin, Barry Weingast, Todd Whitelaw, James

Whitley, Greg Woolf, and Norm Yoffee. All of them have helped me see things differently. I hope they will think that I have put their advice to good use.

I would never have written *The Measure of Civilization* without the encouragement of Rob Tempio at Princeton University Press and Daniel Crewe at Profile Books, who saw a book where I had seen only a dataset; without the guidance of Sandy Dijkstra and Arabella Stein, who brought everyone together; without the support and patience of Kathy St. John; or without the example of my father, Noel Morris, who taught me early on that it pays to count things.

Singapore
April 2012

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INTRODUCTION: QUANTIFYING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

THE PROBLEM

A quarter of a millennium ago, intellectuals in Western Europe discovered that they had a problem. As problems went, theirs was not a bad one: they appeared to be taking over the world, but did not know why. The explanations that eighteenth-century theorists came up with varied wildly, although the most popular ideas all held that since time immemorial, something had made the West different from the rest and determined that Europe would one day dominate the world.

In the early twenty-first century, these ideas are still with us, albeit in heavily modified forms. The most influential argument, now as in the eighteenth century, is probably the theory that Europeans are the heirs to a distinctive and superior cultural tradition.[1] The roots of this Western civilization are most often traced back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, although other advocates identify prehistoric Indo-Europeans, ancient Germans, or medieval Europeans as the founders.[2]

A second strand of eighteenth-century thought credited environment and climate with making Europeans more energetic and creative than other people, and this too has plenty of modern champions.[3] Some scholars combine the ecological and cultural ideas, arguing that it was the back-and-forth between the two that sent

early modern Europe down a new path.[4] Even the idea that Europeans are biologically superior to other humans has been revamped: some economists claim that since the thirteenth century natural selection has made Europeans thriftier and more industrious than anyone else,[5] while a handful of paleoanthropologists suggest that divergent genetic evolution in the ten thousand years since the origin of farming has made Europeans and their descendants more dynamic and inventive than other populations.[6]

These theories all took shape in the eighteenth century, when the explosion of European wealth and power cried out for explanation; and it was only in the later twentieth century, when East Asia was experiencing a similar explosion, that serious challenges emerged. As Japan, the Asian Tigers, and China developed into major economic powers, more and more scholars concluded that theories explaining West's success through long-term cultural, environmental, or racial causes simply could not be right. The big story in world history, they began suggesting, was not the long-term, inexorable rise of the West; it was the tale of a multipolar world, which the West had only recently, temporarily, and perhaps even accidentally come to dominate.

These new ideas are even more varied than the old long-term lock-in theories. The most extreme versions argue that the eighteenth-century theorists got things exactly back to front. According to the new theories, it was in fact China that had a long-term lock-in on global dominance, and only a bizarre series of accidents briefly tipped things in Europe's favor.[7] Most versions, however, reject long-term explanations altogether, arguing that the complex societies of Asia and Europe developed down roughly parallel tracks until the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century, when small differences in state structure, natural endowments, physical and political geography, or intellectual trends gave Europe the lead.[8]

The argument over the causes and consequences of Western power has attracted enormous interest, but the champions of the different theories often seem to be talking past one another. They regularly define key terms in different ways, use different kinds of evidence, and apply different standards of proof. As a result, the antagonists rarely agree on exactly what they are trying to explain, let alone how to do the explaining.

As I see it, the real question at issue is about what I would call *social development*, by which I mean social groups' abilities to master their physical and intellectual environments and get things done in the world. Defenders of the new versions of the eighteenth-century theories tend to argue that Western social development has been higher than that in other parts of the world for hundreds or even thousands of years; their critics tend to argue that Western development pulled ahead only in the past half dozen generations. It seems to me that if we really want to explain why the West rules, we need to measure social development and compare it across time and space. Only when we have established the basic pattern of the history of social development can we start asking why it takes the form it does.

Quantification does not necessarily make debates more objective, but it does normally make them more explicit, forcing rivals to spell out exactly what they mean by the terms they use and to explain why they assign specific numerical values to these differences. Anyone who disagrees with another scholar's judgments will then be able to focus on the evidence and methods being used to calculate the scores, instead of trading vague, undertheorized generalizations. Under one name or another, numerical indices of concepts similar to social development are well established in anthropology, archaeology, economics, finance, policy making, and sociology, and there is an obvious model for such a yardstick in the United Nations' Human Development Index.[9]

In the 1960s and 1970s, some historians began applying similar methods to the past, addressing big questions by mustering vast amounts of statistical data. The classic case was probably Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross*, which brought together data from thousands of plantation records to work out just how profitable slavery was in the nineteenth-century American South and just what the physical experience had been like for the slaves themselves.[10]

Time on the Cross provided a successful model for quantitative history. The study appeared two volumes, the first providing a broad overview and set of interpretations aimed as much at a general readership interested in American history as at professional scholars, while the second volume detailed the statistical techniques and sources that Fogel and Engerman had used.

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