

## BRIDGING HISTORY RETHINKING THE RISE OF THE WEST – “B” & “A” WORK

### Questions to Consider:

Should the rise of the West be understood as the logical outcome of progressive developments in European history? Or, should the rise of the West be viewed as an important historical process to be explained in the context of world history—the result of a complex series of circumstances?

When did the rise of the West happen?

What is modernization theory and how does it fit into the rise of the West?

How do the ideas of Andre Gunder Frank and David Landes differ on the explanation for the rise of the West?

How do world historians like McNeill explain the changes in their interpretations of history?

In what way does the model presented by the video producers of “contingency, accident, and conjuncture” make use of other explanations for the rise of the West? In what ways is the model different?

### Secondary Sources “B” Work:

**Modernization Theory:** Scholars developed modernization theory in the 1950s and the 1960s to support the “West is Best” idea. Partially based on the ideas of Karl Marx, sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein developed an explanation for the rise of the West that was based on the concept of a “world system” that emerged with Europe as the core and its colonies as the periphery. World systems theory is a theory developed in the '60s and '70s in the West that attempts to look at the entire world, and it looks at the entire world in terms of the present. The theory tries to explain why the world has become what it has from 1500 onwards, largely in terms of the relentless drive of capitalism to reshape the world. As capitalism develops, so does labor.

**Summary of Frank’s and Landes’s Views of the Rise of the West:** These scholars’ books, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* and *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, both were published in 1998. Landes’s view in *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* was that the European nations had particular technical strengths and institutional organizations that enabled them again and again to develop new technologies, to build markets with the goods that they sold, and to expand their influence in the world economy from the period of the first maritime voyages around the world. The book also posits that the other parts of the world had no equivalent contribution to make. Frank’s book *Re-Orient* re-emphasizes the role of the Orient in the world economy to argue that the economy of China—and the Qing Empire especially—was growing. It’s an attempt to argue a worldwide focus in the economy, and to that degree he emphasizes the silver trade—something where research has recently really showed how from the late sixteenth century a kind of globe-encompassing silver trade tied together all different regions of the world.

**Contingency, Accident, and Conjuncture:** The video also presents the concepts of contingency, accident, and conjuncture as an explanation for the rise of the West. Contingency is that the West's ascendancy was dependent on silver mined in the Americas. Accident was England's abundance of easily mined coal. Conjuncture was the rise of the nation-state and industrialization at the same time in Europe. The rise of the West was not inevitable, but just a lucky accident.

### Primary Sources: "A" Work

**Anand Yang:** ... I remember in graduate school recoiling when I first read McNeill's *Rise of the West*, but it was really passed off as a world history textbook. It was largely about Europe and Europe's domination of the world. And coming to it as a South Asian historian, as an Asian historian, I was rather disturbed by an eminent historian passing off the story of Europe as the story of the world.

**William McNeill:** Well, when I wrote *The Rise of the West* I thought in terms of separate civilizations, each with its own sphere of influence. And then interacting, overlapping zones, and movement of ideas back and forth, of technologies back and forth, and skills and organization back and forth. And now I think it's not untrue, but it seems to be today it's better to think of the totality of different civilizations lodged within a web—a web of communication and transportation—that means that new experiences, new possibilities, new things can move back and forth perpetually.

**Adam Smith:** The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind ... By uniting the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another's wants, to increase one another's enjoyments, and to encourage one another's industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial. (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [1776].)

**Karl Marx:** The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development. (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848].)

**William McNeill:** A historian, of course, lives through time himself, and the world changes in the course of a lifetime as long as mine quite drastically—really very drastically so that your awareness, your sensibilities, your expectations, your consciousness will alter if you keep reading and keep listening and keep talking to people across 60 or 80 years very considerably, so that the observer has a platform which is constantly transformed by the very fact that he's alive. It's a new world but it's the same principle: We are communicating with the people around us; the people around us communicate with the people around them. It's a web that's been there from the very beginning of humankind, and it's kept us as one species—it's kept us as one adventure upon earth. So you're never the same twice. No day you're quite the same person. Your sensibilities and what you can see in the world will alter depending on what you're looking for, and of course history changes as well, so you're looking back upon a change where these processes were constantly going on. Your sensibilities constantly changed and thus history will always have to be rewritten—always. (William McNeill, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging WorldHistory*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, February 2004.)



Item #3077. Anonymous, BRITISH RAJ IN INDIA (c. 1800–1900).