

# Unit 18

## Rethinking the Rise of the West

### Section 1

#### Unit Materials

#### Questions To Consider

Question 1.

Historians believe that the world was transformed into a global system dominated by Europe between 1500 and 1900. What are some of the different ways historians have tried to explain this “rise of the West”?

Question 2.

What is meant by the term “world systems theory,” and how do world systems operate?

Question 3.

What are the basic issues in the debate between scholars David Landes and Andre Gunder Frank, and what kinds of evidence and arguments do both sides use?

Question 4.

In the last 25 years, how have historians’ changing views of the “rise of the West” illustrated the dynamic nature of the discipline of history?

### The Big Picture

#### How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

While historians may argue about when the West became dominant in world history, they agree that its eventual rise led to increasing global integration.

#### How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

Circa 1800, Europe’s increasing domination of the world led Europeans to think of themselves as different from non-Europeans. This perception, in turn, encouraged twentieth-century historians to interpret the rise of the West in terms of Europe’s differences from the rest of the world.

### Unit Purpose

- Historians’ questions about the rise of the West have changed over time — especially in the last 25 years.
- Historians do not question whether the rise of the West happened, but many historians no longer believe that the rise of the West was inevitable. They actively debate when it happened, how it happened, and why it happened.

- Where historians used to examine the rise of the West only in terms of European developments, they now set it within a much larger global context that considers developments outside of Europe.
- The debate about the rise of the West is just one example of the ways that historical interpretation in the field of world history constantly changes with new evidence, arguments, and priorities.

## Unit Content Overview

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a decided shift in the global balance of power. Historians agree that Europeans burst onto the world scene at this time, yet these scholars are widely divided in their views about the reasons why Europeans became such a powerful global force. For many years, historians believed that the rise of the West was a natural, inevitable, and largely positive development that resulted from the diffusion of superior European technologies, ideologies, and institutions to the rest of the world. Now, however, scholars increasingly frame the story of the rise of the West in a non-Eurocentric world historical context.

This unit traces the changes in the ways historians view the rise of the West, as well as the significance of those changes. In the past, historians have explained Europe's rise — as expressed in European global dominance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — by focusing on maritime achievements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This interpretation has also generally viewed Europe's rise as a result of unique European cultural factors. More recent interpretations, however, have been critical of Western dominance and have attempted to place that dominance in a global historical context. In the 1970s, for example, world systems theory sought to view European dominance as a product of the expansionary nature of capitalism. In the last decade, scholars with opposing views about when, how, and why the West rose have hotly debated new interpretations. . Even more recently, new comparative scholarship has sought to locate Europe's rise within a global trade network long dominated by China. Taken as a whole, this recent work within the field of world history has revised the interpretation and meaning of the rise of the West.

## Unit References

Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative, World Social Change* (Lanham, MD.; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Kenneth Pomeranz, "Beyond the East-West Binary: Resituating Development Paths in the Eighteenth-Century World," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002), 539–90.

Thomas R. Shannon, *An Introduction to the World-System Perspective* 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

## Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 1450–1914
- At the beginning of this period, powerful societies existed around the world in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. People had established elaborate trading networks over both land and sea, connecting distant societies through commercial, biological, and cultural exchanges. One of the hallmarks of this period was the establishment of connections between Afro-Eurasia and the Americas via European voyages of discovery. These new links allowed the transfer of diseases, plants, animals, and humans across the seas, with devastating demographic consequences for the peoples of the Americas. In Europe, this was the period of the Scientific Revolution (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), the Enlightenment (eighteenth century), and the Industrial Revolution (late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Although historians once argued that these technological and philosophical developments — in conjunction with the voyages of discovery — allowed Europeans to become dominant in the world, recent historiography (historians' interpretations of past historical writing) has challenged that view. Instead, current historians juxtapose the European perspective with other contemporary world economies. They point to China's vibrant economy — especially after the Manchu conquest in 1644 — and China's critical role in trade in the Indian Ocean as a silver importer. Islamic empires (Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal) were also strong and powerful until the eighteenth century, and sub-Saharan states were expanding. In Japan, the Tokugawa Shogunate unified Japan in the early seventeenth century, which resulted in the creation of an increasingly commercial society. European dominance of the world economy, it seems, did not exist until about 1800, when it arose as a result of industrialization.

### AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economics and politics by focusing on systems of trade and international exchange as factors in the rise of the West.
- Explores change and continuity by noting the ways historians' interpretations have changed over time and in response to new evidence in the field of world history.
- Discusses technology, demography, and the environment by considering the ways that technological changes — from sea voyages to the Industrial Revolution — allowed for the eventual rise of the West.
- Pays attention to cultural and intellectual developments: Changing historical opinions about the story of the rise of the West has led to a major intellectual reexamination about Western dominance in the past.

## Related Units

- Unit 1. Maps, Time, and World History: What tools do world historians use in the study of history? This unit begins the study of world history by examining its use of geographical and chronological frameworks: how they have shaped the understanding of world history and been used to chart the past. It is related to Unit 18 because changes in historical views of the rise of the West resulted largely because historians altered their units of analysis — from the nation-state to larger, supranational networks.
- Unit 19. Global Industrialization: How was the story of the Industrial Revolution a global process? Industrialization was and is a global process, not just a European or American

story. This unit links Cuba, Uruguay, Europe, and Japan, examining the impact of industry on trade, environment, culture, technology, and lives around the world. It is related to Unit 18 because of the contested but important role industrialization played in the rise of the West.

- Unit 20. Imperial Designs: What lasting impacts did modern imperialism have on the world? The profound consequences of imperialism are examined in the South African frontier and Brazil, where politics, culture, industrial capitalism, and the environment were shaped and re-shaped. This unit is related to Unit 18 because modern imperialism, as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was contingent upon the rise of the West.
- Unit 26. World History and Identity: How have global forces redefined both individual and group identities in the modern world? This unit examines the transnational identity that emerged from the Chinese diaspora and compares it to a newly re-defined national Chechen identity forged through war with Russia. It is related to Unit 18 because the global links created during this earlier period of the rise of the West were critical to the development of present-day globalization.

## Section 2

### Video-Related Materials

#### Video Segment 1: The Story of the Rise of the West

This video segment explains how historians have traditionally viewed the rise of the West. It documents the story of European intervention in established Eurasian trading networks through their maritime ventures. It highlights how their colonization efforts in the Americas and their growing abilities to sail anywhere in the world both helped establish the first truly global trading network. Next, it delves into the process of industrialization in Europe, which in the late eighteenth century began to transform Europe's labor systems, productive capacities, and technologies. These changes allowed Europeans to produce ever greater numbers of commodities and —through fossil fuel energy — to create ever more efficient ways of transporting such goods by land and by sea. These abilities, in turn, prompted Europeans to use their goods and technologies to gain strong footholds in global trading networks, and eventually to create their own empires throughout much of the world.

#### Video Segment 2: World Systems Critique

Until recently, historians viewed the story of growing European dominance, industrialization, and imperialism as an inevitable part of world history. This segment begins by demonstrating many scholars' long-held belief that the course European history took was "normal," and that all nations, in order to progress, should follow the European model. This "modernization theory," was increasingly questioned by scholars who lived through the period of European decolonization, when they saw former European colonies reject the European way of life in favor of alternate paths. In the 1960s and 70s, some scholars developed a "world systems theory" that viewed European domination of the world as the result of European capitalism and its capacity to exploit cheap labor and underdeveloped markets in weaker areas of the world. The ties linking European capitalist areas (the core) with non-European weaker areas (the periphery) were seen as a "world system." Unlike traditional historical views of European global domination, world systems theory is critical of both capitalism and Western expansion.

#### Video Segment 3: The "Great Divergence" and Comparative World History

This segment looks at the debates that have arisen in the last 25 years about the rise of the West. It begins with the opposing views of two eminent scholars, David Landes (author of *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*) and Andre Gunder Frank (author of *ReOrient*). Landes argues that European global dominance resulted from inherent cultural characteristics within European

society, such as a distinctive work ethic. Frank, on the other hand, argues that European global dominance only became obvious after 1800, and that until then China held the dominant role in the world economy. The segment then moves to very recent comparative histories that place the rise of the West in an increasingly global context. These works emphasize three factors to contextualize the rise of the West. First, they argue that European dominance could only occur because Europeans were able to take advantage of slave labor and silver mines in the Americas. Europeans could then put the profits to use in global trade networks. Second, they argue that Europeans — especially the British — were able to industrialize early, primarily because they were fortunate enough to have a ready supply of coal deposits near large populations. Finally, the historians argue that the combination of early industrialization with the development of the nation-state and nationalism in Europe produced a particularly powerful expansionary response. Overall, the point of these studies is that European global dominance was not inevitable, and that issues of when, why, and how the West rose are still matters worthy of debate.

### **Perspectives on the Past: “Moving Platform” of the Historian**

Why do historians continually revise the historical opinions of previous generations? Historian William McNeill addresses this question by arguing that historians’ opinions continually change as historians grow older and learn more. Over a lifetime of communication and shifting priorities, what the historian sees and pays attention to changes, thus making it necessary to continually rewrite history.

## **Video Details**

### **Who Is Interviewed**

- Jerry H. Bentley
- Patrick Manning
- Anand Yang

### **Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video**

- Adam Smith, eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher
- Karl Marx, nineteenth-century German philosopher
- William McNeill, contemporary world historian

## **Program Contents**

<b>Begins</b>	<b>Ends</b>	<b>Contents</b>
00:00	01:35	Show tease, show opening credits
01:36	04:11	Program overview/introduction
04:12	10:49	Video Segment 1. <i>The Story of the Rise of the West</i>
10:50	16:46	Video Segment 2. <i>World Systems Critique</i>
16:47	24:38	Video Segment 3. <i>The “Great Divergence” and Comparative World History</i>
24:39	26:09	Perspectives on the Past: <i>“Moving Platform” of the Historian</i>
26:10	28:25	Show close and program credits