Unit 18
Rethinking the Rise of the West

Introduction to Unit
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, new interpretations have been hotly debated by scholars with opposing views about when, how, and why the West rose. 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.

Learning Objectives
- Identify the different ways historians have tried to explain the rise of the West.
- Explain what is meant by the term “world systems theory” and how world systems operate.
- Compare the basic issues in the debate between scholars David Landes and Andre Gunder Frank: What kinds of evidence and arguments are used on both sides?
- Trace how historians’ changing views of the rise of the West in the last 25 years illustrate the dynamic nature of the discipline of history.

Preparing for This Session
Read Unit 18 in the Bridging World History online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Opium War, New Imperialism, Trade [in East Asia]).
Before You Begin—45 minutes

In the video, the following explanation is given for the traditional story of the rise of the West:

The fifteenth to eighteenth centuries saw the rise of the West. Trade routes developed from east to west, most notably in the Indian Ocean. Europeans desired the spices, tea, porcelains, silks, and colorful cotton textiles produced by Asians. In the late fifteenth century, the Portuguese entered this trade directly by rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the southern end of Africa. By the seventeenth century, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and the English joined directly in the Indian Ocean economy, but the European merchants had no trade goods the Asians wanted. The Spanish-sponsored voyages of Christopher Columbus accidentally provided the solution: silver in the Americas. The Europeans used the profits from their trade with Asia to promote more voyages around the globe. By the eighteenth century, English entrepreneurs used advances in scientific knowledge and engineering to begin an industrial revolution by applying steam power to the machines that produced textiles. Abundant coal in the British Isles and improved transportation that used the same steam engine to power trains aided the British Industrial Revolution. The rhythm of work, now organized by clocks, changed and made the use of human labor more efficient and productive. The British East India Company established trading relationships with individual Indian rulers to the advantage of the Company. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British used their economic and military powers to dominate much of Asia. The British government then was able to help British cotton textiles outsell Indian calicoes in the world market. The British and other Europeans dominated world trade, and Europeans politically controlled many parts of the globe, including Africa, by the end of the nineteenth century.

Which parts of the traditional explanation are familiar to you? Which parts do you want to know more about?

Watch the Video for “Unit 18: Rethinking the Rise of the West”—30 minutes

While you watch the video, take notes on your questions about the increase in Western power in the world.

Activity 1: The Rise of the West—105 minutes

The class will break into groups for inner/outer circle seminars. Each seminar group should be no more than 16 people, so that eight people can speak in a circle at a time.

The topic of the seminar is the rise of the West. A list of suggested seminar questions follows. Participants should refer to the primary and secondary sources given below to support the claims they make in the seminar.

Questions for Seminar

- 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?


**Unit Activities, cont’d.**

- 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?

**Primary Sources**

**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. (Anand Yang, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, October 2003.)

**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. (William McNeill, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, February 2004.)

**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 World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, February 2004.)

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*Item #3077. Anonymous, BRITISH RAJ IN INDIA (c. 1800–1900). Courtesy of The Image Works.*
Secondary Sources

**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. ("Rethinking the Rise of the West," Bridging World History, VHS, [Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2004].)

**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. ("Rethinking the Rise of the West," Bridging World History, VHS, [Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2004]) and (Pat Manning, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, Bridging World History, Oregon Public Broadcasting, October 2003.)

**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. ("Rethinking the Rise of the West," Bridging World History, VHS, [Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2004].)
Read Unit 18 in the online text, Section 3, Reading 2: McNeill, William H., “The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years,” *Journal of World History* 1, no.1 (1990): 1–21 and answer the following questions.

### Reading Questions

- What was the main idea of the first edition of *The Rise of the West*?
- How did the second edition differ? Why did McNeill’s treatment of *Africa* not change after 25 years, much to the dismay of Africanists and world historians who are Africanists?
- Why did McNeill’s views of civilizations shift from being clearly recognizable to inchoate entities?
- What parts of his new approach to world history as “encounters with strangers” make sense to you?

### Optional: Visit the Web Site

Explore this topic further on the *Bridging World History* Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.