

# THE MEASURE OF CIVILIZATION: HOW SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DECIDES THE FATE OF NATIONS BY IAN MORRIS

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*How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations*



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*Author of Why the West Rules—for Now*

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In the last thirty years, there have been fierce debates over how civilizations develop and why the West became so powerful. *The Measure of Civilization* presents a brand-new way of investigating these questions and provides new tools for assessing the long-term growth of societies. Using a groundbreaking numerical index of social development that compares societies in different times and places, award-winning author Ian Morris sets forth a sweeping examination of Eastern and Western development across 15,000 years since the end of the last ice age. He offers surprising conclusions about when and why the West came to dominate the world and fresh perspectives for thinking about the twenty-first century.

Adapting the United Nations' approach for measuring human development, Morris's index breaks social development into four traits--energy capture per capita, organization, information technology, and war-making capacity--and he uses archaeological, historical, and current government data to quantify patterns. Morris reveals that for 90 percent of the time since the last ice age, the world's most advanced region has been at the western end of Eurasia, but contrary to what many historians once believed, there were roughly 1,200 years--from about 550 to 1750 CE--when an East Asian region was more advanced. Only in the late eighteenth century CE, when northwest Europeans tapped into the energy trapped in fossil fuels, did the West leap ahead.

Resolving some of the biggest debates in global history, *The Measure of Civilization* puts forth innovative tools for determining past, present, and future economic and social trends.

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- *The Measure of Civilization How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations*

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History in-the-long-run

By Bruce H Beck

A truly significant contribution to providing data to evaluate history in scientific manner. The numbers reveal important patterns that would otherwise be missed or ignored. Dr. Morris's other texts: "Why the West Rules for Now" and "War, What Is It Good For?" should also be studied in conjunction with Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs and Steel" and "Collapse" and Francis Fukuyama's masterpieces 'Political Order' and "Political Decay". For an great introduction to 'Cliodynamics' [history as science] read Peter Turchin's "Secular Cycles", "Historical Dynamics" and "War and Peace and War". These authors illuminate an understanding of human history that reveals and explains the structural problems of current events and their possible solutions. [Some key concepts to understand from the group: "How to get to Denmark Problem", "the role of geography in determining history", "history view from through the long lens", "dysfunctional equilibrium", "frontiers as incubators of group solidarity", 'asabiya', etc.]

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"Quantative" model of history

By Hans G. Despain

In this highly ambitious book Ian Morris sets out to "quantify" "social development" (p. 3). Social development in turn is defined as "a measure of communities' abilities to get things done in the world" (p. 6). More specifically, the bold aim of Morris is to explain why "Western" (p. 31) nations have come to dominant the world economically and politically (p. 50).



More generally he sets out to explain how the "core" areas of both the East and the West shift over time (p. 35). More narrowly Morris's analysis can challenge such controversial statements such as Gregory Clark contentious pronouncement that "the average person in the world of 1800 [CE] was no better off than the average person of 100,000 BC" (p. 57).

In this review I have remained neutral and attempted to function as a reporter. The five stars are for his explicit details in the development of his "social development index" and not offered as an endorsement. This book is important and is sure to generate even more reaction than did his "Why the West Rules - For Now."

In his book "Why the West Rules - For Now" addressed the relative importance of material and cultural forces shaping history. This book rigorously upholds the findings of the earlier book (p. 255 - 7). Namely culture is a relatively passive or dependent variable in shaping history.

Theories abound which argue the West domination is a function of a superior culture, advantageous climate and natural environment, or even that Western people are biological superior to other people of the world (e.g. Herbert Spencer pp. 7 - 9). Morris maintains these theories will not do. The recent rise of Japan, the Asian Miracles (e.g. South Korea, etc.) and China immediately reveal the shortcomings.

Morris maintains this "is a companion volume" to his book "Why the West Rules - For Now" (p. 4). His main aim is to contribute to the "a new synthesis" biological and social evolutionism (p. 16). His effort in "The Measurement of Civilization" is to make the details of this effort "explicit" (p. 252). Morris is working from the tradition of "neo-evolutionary" (p. 12) attempting to theorize and quantify historical progress. Leslie White offers an elegantly simple and rudimentary formula: Culture = Energy x Technology (p. 10). For Morris this definition is too simplistic and too ambiguous.

Thus, Morris reformates the neo-evolutionary efforts around four "minimum" traits: Energy capture per person, social organization, information technology and war-making capacity (pp. 39 - 40). He details both the measurement and historical analysis of each of these traits in its own chapter, energy capture (pp. 53 - 143), social organization (pp. 144 - 72), war-making capacity (pp. 173 - 217), and information technology (218 - 37). Each of these will be sure to generate controversy. Morris's detailed analysis will be highly useful to his critics and supporters.

Morris is well aware of the problems and shortcomings of his efforts. Quantification is not meant to be the definitive account of social development and history, but a tool to merely assist in historical assessment.

The problems with Morris' efforts include the fact that quantification imports ethical hazards. His definition of social development may not be precise enough. His minimum of four traits may be overly reductionist. History is also a very troublesome business, so facts and measurement will always be controversy.

The heart of Morris's book is to be found in the detailed analysis of his measurement in chapters 3 - 6. Reviews in professional journals are sure to take issue with much of his analysis. However, he has been very careful to suggest rather modest applications of his quantification of "social development" (p. 238).

The main result, echoing his deductions from "Why the West Rules - For Now" is the "unequivocal" conclusion that there is one and only one path to modernity, namely energy capture/use and technological development (p. 258). Morris' "reveals not only a very clear progression from foragers to farmers to factory workers and beyond but also a series of hard ceilings limiting how far development could go under each broad form of organization" (p. 258). Such bold and provocative conclusions will be sure to lift the interests

of critics and champions.

If the "one path" conclusion is not controversial, the second conclusion will be. For Morris the path to modernity is one (energy capture/use and technological development). How a nation or regions develops toward energy capture and technological development may be more variable. Nonetheless, Morris prefers to call it a "qualified unilinearity" (p. 260).

Morris maintains culture, individuals, and "accidents" play a relative minor role in history. These conclusions are sure to rankle many historians and social theorists. Morris' book demands deep scrutiny and sincere criticism. However, he also deserves to be applauded for explicit historical and theoretical detail he provides. He should be commended for a thoughtful and thought-provoking book which will once again find a very wide, and well-deserved, audience.

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