# The Rise of the West and Historical Methodology: Crash Course World History #212

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=nosJVTuCHFk
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/nosJVTuCHFk

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about how history gets written. "Mr. Green! Mr. Green! I want to write books about history when I grow up." Well, we're not about the process of writing history today, Me From the Past. Also, you are a liar. So you're never going to be a history writer because, try as you might, you can't stop making things up. Maybe someday, if you're lucky, you'll write a historical novel. Although, probably not because, you know, it involves research, which you also suck at. So today we're going to talk about how historians answer questions and the choices they make in turning their ideas into books. We like to think of history as being the story of what happens, so there's no ambiguity or whatever. It's just, you know, in 1776, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. This is part of our thinking that, like, math is fact-based and literature is opinion. So we imagine history as being, like, over toward the fact-y stuff. But in truth, literature has a lot of facts in it. There are poems that are objectively good and others that are objectively bad. And if you've ever been to a mathematician party and heard mathematician arguments, you'll know that math has a lot of opinions in it. What? I go to a lot of math parties. That's cool. My point is, that that whole fact to opinion continuum we imagine in academics doesn't really make sense. We just need to learn to ignore that and think instead about how to examine the world critically. So today we're going to examine the ways that different historians have tackled a really problematic issue: The Rise of the West. So what do "rise" and "west" even mean in that phrase? Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble. So "The West" is a geographical designation, kind of. It means, like, Western Europe, North America, and Australia, which as you can see here are west of Asia? And also east of Asia. In fact, everything is both east and west of everything else because it's a globe. But the West is also kind of a culture. It's a set of ideas influenced by Judeo-Christian thought and Greek philosophy, with a little Enlightenment rationalism and Adam Smith's economics thrown in. Anyway, it's complicated, like all civilizations that span multiple continents, but most of you at least have an idea in your head when I talk about "The West." And then there's the question of what we mean by "rise" when we talk about the Rise of the West, which leads us back to the philosophical question of the nature of history itself. I mean, is history a series of rises and falls, like the story of the Roman Empire, or is it cyclical, like the Mandate of Heaven narrative that we saw when we looked at early Chinese history? So you could say, in fact, that the phrase itself "The Rise of the West" is a little bit Western. The whole thing's a bit nebulous. And that makes it a popular subject for historians to tackle because you can hang a lot of ideas on it. Like, Ian Morris, who teaches at Stanford, wrote a book called, Why the West Rules -- For Now, which casts the question in terms of political, military, and economic dominance. And Victor Davis Hanson made this idea of dominance more explicit in his book on military history, Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power, which also offers a pretty straightforward reason why the West became so powerful: It won a lot of wars. Thanks, Thought Bubble. Another way to think about this question is in terms of, like, success and failure. That's how Daron AcemoÄŸlu and James Robinson approached it in their 2012 book, Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty. These guys had two big ideas. First, that success can be defined by wealth, as well as political power. And secondly, that when we look at successes, we shouldn't look at individuals, or communities, or continents, we should look at nation-states. Now, this book isn't explicitly about the West, but if you look at the countries that they're talking about as successes and failures, it seems like they're talking about kind of the same thing we are. Their successful nations are all in what we think of as "The West," with a couple of important exceptions in Japan and Southern Africa. So AcemoÄŸlu teaches economics at MIT and Robinson teaches government at Harvard, which is important because they're not, like, academically trained historians. Some would say that's an advantage, but you know who wouldn't say that? Historians. But anyway, if you're training is in economics and government, then you're going to see history through the lens of economics and politics, in the same that if you're trained as accountant you might see history as an indeterminable series of ledgers to be balanced, which it kind of is. And if you're say a novelist you'll probably see history as a series of narratives and you'll insert narrative. Even when it doesn't necessarily exist. How we frame historical questions is extremely important as is the way we're trained and the tools we use to try to seek answers. So AcemoÄŸlu and Robinson focus on institutions and claim that a nation is successful when it's economic and political institutions are inclusive. This focus on institutions explains a lot and it's very convincing, and it corrects previous theories. For example, Montesquieu's idea that tropical nations tend to be poorer either because the people "tended to be lazy and to lack inquisitiveness" or because diseases and poor soil inhibit economic growth. But according to AcemoÄŸlu and Robinson the data just doesn't support Montesquieu's conclusions. Yeah that's a little prob... Oooh it's time for the open letter! But first let's see what's in the globe today. Oh! It's Montesquieu. Do you have a first name by the way? Oh, he does, his full name is Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, which explains why we only call him Montesquieu. Anyway, an open letter to Montesquieu. Dear Montesquieu, You had so many good ideas, separation of powers, that's a definite winner. You basically coined the word despotism. That's a great word, I mean before the word despotism, our only word for that thing was like, government. But this idea that you had that poor people were doomed to stay poor has proven astonishingly powerful, and it's also entirely wrong. Fortunately, Montesquieu, most of us have moved on from your theories about poverty, although, just recently. Best wishes, John Green. Okay, so let's talk about these inclusive institutions that are supposed to be so good for nations. In economics it's institutions quote "That enforce property rights, create a level playing field, and encourage investments in new technologies and skills." In other words, the kind we associate with modern market capitalism, you know, with some regulations. You know, like in the U.S. we have very open markets, but still Walmart isn't allowed to sell black tar heroin. They are allowed to sell guns though. Inclusive political institutions are those that are characterized by pluralism which means that they include a number of interests with different political perspectives that can act as checks on executive authority. So success isn't just about democracy or "majority rules" as we have lately learned in Iraq; it's about inclusive pluralism. So the nations that AcemoÄŸlu and Robinson see as successful are the ones with the most inclusive economies and the most pluralistic governments. Now they are able to draw a clear correlation, but it's a bit harder to say that these particular institutions caused those nations to become successful. This is the nature of correlation; it's possible that they could be right that institutions were necessary for a nation to become rich and powerful, but there may be other institutions that matter as much or more than the economic and political ones they identify. Another guy who's written a lot about this stuff is Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama also believes that institutions are the key to a nation state's success, but in his book The Origins of Political Order he identifies the rule of law as the institution that underlies all success. To Fukuyama, the critical thing is that there be a rule of law that is superior to rulers who temporarily happen to command the state's armed forces and bureaucracy. If no one is more powerful than the law and no one can change the law, then inclusive economic institutions and pluralistic political ones sort of naturally come forth. Now, that's not all that different from what AcemoÄŸlu and Robinson described but there is a twist in how Fukuyama gets there. He argues that the root of the rule of law in Europe as the basis for its institutions is in religion, specifically the Catholic Church. For him it was the Catholic Church that established the idea that there was a law that was binding, even to kings, providing the limits that are the heart of AcemoÄŸlu and Robinson's pluralistic institutions. And this would push the origins of the West's institutional advantages back further than the advent of the nation state, right, because until recently, religion was far more

important to most people than, you know, nation states or capitalistic economic institutions. Fukuyama, you'd be surprised to learn, is a political scientist and classicist by training, so it's not that much of a surprise that he finds the roots of the West's preeminence in governance and classic religious thought. Okay, let's look at one last example of a different approach to this historical question. Uh, that guy Ian Morris, who we talked about earlier, he wrote the book Why the West Rules -- For Now. He broke down his arguments into a mathematical formula based on four dimensions: energy capture, how much humans have been able to use energy beyond their own muscles; social organization, which he derives by measuring the largest city in a region; information technology, not just the Internet, also like writing and books; and war making capacity, which we can learn about through archaeology and also traditional history. And then he combines these numbers to develop a social development index that describes the West and the East at various points in history from 14,000 BCE to 2000 CE. Now, Morris is not an economist or a mathematician; he's a classically trained historian, but here he is using numbers, not very sophisticatedly and, uh, lots of criticism of them, but using numbers nonetheless. And I think that speaks to how data-driven contemporary academics is. We like things that can be quantified. I mean, many of you are teenagers taking AP World History, and at the end of that, you will take a test that gives you a number between one and five that tells you how much you know about world history. My number was two, but hopefully yours will be higher, because I am smarter now than I was then. Now I do wanna note one other thing, which is that you've probably noticed that none of these books question the assumption that the West has been dominant in the world stage over the last couple centuries. That is also a question of perspective. Like, from the perspective of non-human residents of Earth, the West has been a total failure. But there's a certain set of data we look at when it comes to humans, like uh, GDP, the total size of a country's economy; or number of tanks; or innovation indexes; or life expectancy. Through all of those lenses, the West has come out on top in the last 200 years. But that leads us to larger questions about why we measure civilizations and determine winners and losers in the first place and what that does to our thinking. As Morris points out, one of the problematic things about reducing human social development to a number is that it can dehumanize individuals. Now numbers are a great shorthand and they can be very useful for comparisons, like, I would like to know if my life expectancy would be longer in the United States or in Canada. Stan informs me that life expectancy is longer in Canada, which doesn't make any sense. I always thought that Canada was America's hat. Turns out that we are Canada's pants. Anyway, Stan, we got to move to Canada. But numbers are always incomplete, and too often we mistake what is easily quantifiable with what is important. Also, when we ask a question about why the West rules or why Western nations have succeeded, what are we gonna to do with the answer? Is it for Westerners to congratulate ourselves on a job well done, or to explain away the astonishing inequality in the world as being so deeply rooted in the past as to make any efforts to fix it futile? I'd like to think that by understanding what has made the West more successful in certain ways, we can formulate policies that will lead to a general improvement, at least in those ways, around the world. But what we've tried to provide here a series of perspectives on a historical question to emphasize the fact that all history has its perspective. It's common to use mathematical measures to analyze contemporary world problems and attempt to find solutions, and that's a good thing in many ways. But when it comes to history and politics, mathematical formulas also have their perspective, and we need to remember that each of those perspectives is necessarily biased to look at some things and not others. Whether it's Crash Course or your world history textbook, it's important to remember that bias is inherent to the experience of writing and telling the story of history. So when you see a number or a claim of success or failure, stop and ask yourself what sorts of information went into that number or into that conclusion, and just as important, what might have been ignored or missed? Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week. Crash Course is made here in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz studio with the help of all of these nice people. It's also possible because of your support through Subbable. Subbable is a voluntary subscription service that allows you to support Crash Course directly so we can keep it free for everyone forever, so please check it out. Thank you again for watching, thanks to all of our Subbable subscribers, and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.