

## **Watch this man - On Niall Ferguson's neoimperialist vision**

Monday 14 November 2011, by [MISHRA Pankaj](#) (Date first published: 3 October 2011).

**Review: *Civilisation: The West and the Rest* by Niall Ferguson  
Allen Lane, 402 pp, £25.00, March 2011, ISBN 978 1 84614 273 4.**

---

'Civilisation's going to pieces,' Tom Buchanan, the Yale-educated millionaire, abruptly informs Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. 'I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by this man Goddard? ... The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be - will be utterly submerged.' 'Tom's getting very profound,' his wife Daisy remarks. Buchanan carries on: 'This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.' 'We've got to beat them down,' Daisy whispers with a wink at Nick. But there's no stopping Buchanan. 'And we've produced all the things that go to make civilisation - oh, science and art, and all that. Do you see?'

'There was something pathetic in his concentration,' Carraway, the narrator, observes, 'as if his complacency, more acute than of old, was not enough to him any more.' The scene, early in the novel, helps identify Buchanan as a bore - and a boor. It also evokes a deepening panic among America's Anglophile ruling class. Wary of Jay Gatz, the self-made man with a fake Oxbridge pedigree, Buchanan is nervous about other upstarts rising out of nowhere to challenge the master race.

Scott Fitzgerald based Goddard, at least partly, on Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, the author of the bestseller *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* (1920). Stoddard's fame was a sign of his times, of the overheated racial climate of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the Yellow Peril seemed real, the Ku Klux Klan had re-emerged, and Theodore Roosevelt worried loudly about 'race-suicide'. In 1917, justifying his reluctance to involve the United States in the European war, Woodrow Wilson told his secretary of state that 'white civilisation and its domination over the world rested largely on our ability to keep this country intact.'

Hysteria about 'white civilisation' gripped America after Europe's self-mutilation in the First World War had encouraged political assertiveness among subjugated peoples from Egypt to China. Unlike other popular racists, who parsed the differences between Nordic and Latin peoples, Stoddard proposed a straightforward division of the world into white and coloured races. He also invested early in Islamophobia, arguing in *The New World of Islam* (1921) that Muslims posed a sinister threat to a hopelessly fractious and confused West. Like many respectable eugenicists of his time, Stoddard later found much to like about the Nazis, which marked him out for instant superannuation following the exposure of Nazi crimes in 1945.

The banner of white supremacy has been more warily raised ever since in post-imperial Europe,

and very rarely by mainstream politicians and writers. In the United States, racial anxieties have been couched either in such pseudo-scientific tracts about the inferiority of certain races as *The Bell Curve*, or in big alarmist theories like Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'. It's not at all surprising that in his last book Huntington fretted about the destruction by Latino immigration of America's national identity, which is apparently a construct of 'Anglo-Protestant culture'. As power ostensibly shifts to the East, a counterpoise to dismay over the West's loss of authority and influence is sought in a periodic ballyhooing of the 'trans-Atlantic alliance', as in Philip Bobbitt's *Terror and Consent* (2008), which Niall Ferguson in an enthusiastic review claimed will 'be read with pleasure by men of a certain age, class and education from Manhattan's Upper East Side to London's West End'.

Ferguson himself is *homo atlanticus* redux. In a preface to the UK edition of *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*, he writes of being seduced away from a stodgy Oxbridge career, early in the 2000s, to the United States, 'where the money and power actually were'. The author of two previous books about 19<sup>th</sup>-century banking, Ferguson became known to the general public with *The Pity of War* (1998), a long polemic, fluent and bristling with scholarly references, that blamed Britain for causing the First World War. According to Ferguson, Prussia wasn't the threat it was made out to be by Britain's Liberal cabinet. The miscalculation not only made another war inevitable after 1919, and postponed the creation of an inevitably German-dominated European Union to the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also tragically and fatally weakened Britain's grasp on its overseas possessions.

This wistful vision of an empire on which the sun need never have set had an immediately obvious defect. It grossly underestimated – in fact, ignored altogether – the growing strength of anti-colonial movements across Asia, which, whatever happened in Europe, would have undermined Britain's dwindling capacity to manage its vast overseas holdings. At the time, however, *The Pity of War* seemed boyishly and engagingly revisionist, and it established Ferguson's reputation: he was opinionated, 'provocative' and amusing, all things that seem to be more cherished in Britain's intellectual culture than in any other.

In retrospect, *The Pity of War's* Stoddardesque laments about the needless emasculation of Anglo-Saxon power announced a theme that would become more pronounced as Ferguson, setting aside his expertise in economic history, emerged as an evangelist-cum-historian of empire. He was already arguing in *The Cash Nexus*, published a few months before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, that 'the United States should be devoting a larger percentage of its vast resources to making the world safe for capitalism and democracy' – if necessary by military force. 'Let me come clean,' he wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* in April 2003, a few weeks after the shock-and-awe campaign began in Iraq, 'I am a fully paid-up member of the neoimperialist gang.'

*Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003), Ferguson's next book, appeared in America with a more didactic subtitle: 'The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power'. The word 'empire' still caused some unease in the US, whose own national myths originated in an early, short-lived and selective anti-imperialism. An exasperated Ferguson – 'the United States,' he claimed, 'is an empire, in short, that dare not speak its name' – set out to rescue the word from the discredit into which political correctness had apparently cast it. Britain's 19<sup>th</sup>-century empire 'undeniably pioneered free trade, free capital movements and, with the abolition of slavery, free labour. It invested immense sums in developing a global network of modern communications. It spread and enforced the rule of law over vast areas.' 'Without the spread of British rule around the world,' he went on, in a typical counterfactual manoeuvre, colonised peoples, such as Indians, would not have what are now their most valuable ideas and institutions – parliamentary democracy, individual freedom and the English language.

America should now follow Britain's example, Ferguson argued, neglecting to ask why it needed to

make the modern world if Britain had already done such a great job. He agreed with the neocon Max Boot that the United States should re-create across Asia the 'enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets'. 'The work needs to begin, and swiftly,' he wrote, 'to encourage American students at the country's leading universities to think more seriously about careers overseas.'

Ferguson's proposed 'Anglobalisation' of the world was little more than an updated version of American 'modernisation theory', first proposed as an alternative to Communism during the Cold War, and now married to revolutionary violence of the kind for which Communist regimes had been reviled. It makes for melancholy reading in 2011. But in the first heady year of the global war on terror, easy victories over the ragtag army of the Taliban ignited megalomaniacal fantasies about the 'Rest' across a broad ideological spectrum in Anglo-America, from Ann Coulter arguing that 'we should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity' to the unctuous 'Empire-Lite' of Michael Ignatieff and the 'liberal imperialism' peddled by Robert Cooper, one of Blair's fly-by-night gurus. 'Islamofascism' seemed as evil as Nazism, Saddam Hussein was another Hitler, a generation-long battle loomed, and invocations of Winston Churchill - 'the greatest', according to Ferguson, 'of all Anglo-Americans', his resolute defence of English-speaking peoples commemorated by a bust in the Bush White House - seemed to stiffen spines all across the Eastern Seaboard.

The reception a writer receives in a favourable political context can be the making of him. This applies particularly well to Ferguson, whose books are known less for their original scholarly contribution than for containing some provocative counterfactuals. In Britain, his bluster about the white man's burden, though largely ignored by academic historians, gained substance from a general rightward shift in political and cultural discourse, which made it imperative for such apostles of public opinion as Andrew Marr to treat Ferguson with reverence. But his apotheosis came in the United States, where - backed by the prestige of Oxbridge and, more important, a successful television series - he became a wise Greek counsellor to many aspiring Romans. He did not have to renounce long-held principles to be elevated to a professorship at Harvard, primetime punditry on CNN and Fox, and high-altitude wonkfest at Davos and Aspen. He quickly and frictionlessly became the most conspicuous refugee from post-imperial Britain to cheerlead Washington's (and New York's) consensus.

To a reader from the world the British supposedly made, *Empire* belonged recognisably to the tradition of what the Chinese thinker Tang Tiaoding bluntly described in 1903 as 'white people's histories'. Swami Vivekananda, India's most famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinker, articulated a widespread moral disapproval of the pith-helmeted missionaries of Western civilisation celebrated by Ferguson:

*"Intoxicated by the heady wine of newly acquired power, fearsome like wild animals who see no difference between good and evil, slaves to women, insane in their lust, drenched in alcohol from head to foot, without any norms of ritual conduct, unclean ... dependent on material things, grabbing other people's land and wealth by hook or crook ... the body their self, its appetites their only concern - such is the image of the western demon in Indian eyes."*

In 1877, decades before anti-colonial leaders and intellectuals across Asia and Africa developed a systematic political critique of colonialism, the itinerant Muslim activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was attacking 'the trap of duplicity' in British accounts of India. The British had invested immense sums in developing a global network of modern communications simply in order, al-Afghani wrote, 'to drain the substance of our wealth and facilitate the means of trade for the inhabitants of the British Isles and extend their sphere of riches'. Two generations of Western historians have essentially confirmed the early Asian and African arguments that the imperatives of 'free trade', whether imposed, as on China, by gunboats, or as on India, by outright occupation, had a devastating effect.

The Indian Declaration of Independence in 1930 inadvertently summed up the multifarious damage inflicted on a swathe of subjugated countries from Ottoman Turkey and Egypt to Java:

*"Village industries, such as hand spinning, have been destroyed ... and nothing has been substituted, as in other countries, for the crafts thus destroyed."*

*"Customs and currency have been so manipulated as to bring further burdens on the peasantry. British manufactured goods constitute the bulk of our imports. Customs duties betray partiality for British manufacturers, and revenue from them is not used to lessen the burden on the masses but for sustaining a highly extravagant administration. Still more arbitrary has been the manipulation of the exchange ratio, which has resulted in millions being drained away from the country ... All administrative talent is killed and the masses have to be satisfied with petty village offices and clerkships ... the system of education has torn us from our moorings."*

Ferguson did not entirely ignore the more egregious crimes of imperialism: the slave trade, the treatment of Australian aborigines or the famines that killed tens of millions across Asia. But he offered a robust defence of British motives, which apparently were humanitarian as much as economic. Transporting millions of indentured Asian labourers to far-off colonies (Indians to the Malay Peninsula, Chinese to Trinidad) was terrible, but 'we cannot pretend that this mobilisation of cheap and probably underemployed Asian labour to grow rubber and dig gold had no economic value.' And he challenged the 'fashionable' allegation that 'the British authorities did nothing to relieve the drought-induced famines of the period.' In any case, 'whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behaviour from within British society.' He sounds like the Europeans described by V.S. Naipaul – the grandson of indentured labourers – in *A Bend in the River*, who 'wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else', but also 'wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves'.

Ferguson's next book, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004), a selective history of American imperial interventions, showed him to be increasingly concerned with the capability rather than the legitimacy of the American empire. He was convinced that domestic social welfare programmes like Medicare and Medicaid had to be cut drastically in order to build more foreign outposts for jodhpur-clad Americans. But Americans, it turned out, were not rushing to Abercrombie & Fitch to equip themselves for life in the tropics. Some zealous young Republicans in Baghdad's Green Zone were busy dismantling the Iraqi state, but they clearly did not impress Ferguson. 'America's brightest and best,' he complained, 'aspire not to govern Mesopotamia but to manage MTV; not to rule the Hejaz but to run a hedge fund.'

'If one adds together the illegal immigrants, the jobless and the convicts,' he argued, 'there is surely ample raw material for a larger American army.' But by 2006, the worst year of the anti-American insurgency, Ferguson was convinced that America was not up to the 'labour-intensive' task of occupying and governing Iraq. Recalling Gibbon for the readers of *Vanity Fair*, he identified some alarmingly diverse portents of the decline and fall of Western civilisation: they included America's dependence on 'Asian central banks and Middle Eastern treasuries' for its wars; Muslim immigrants (Ferguson was an early exponent of 'Eurabia'); feminism, which had caused Europe's demographic decline; and the fact that 'girls no longer play with dolls; they are themselves the dolls, dressed according to the dictates of the fashion industry.' Americans were overweight, while Europeans, turning their back on Christianity and warfare and sponging on the welfare state, were degenerate idlers. 'Endlessly gaming, chatting and chilling with their iPods,' Ferguson wrote, 'the next generation already has a more tenuous connection to "Western civilisation" than most parents appreciate.'

It didn't seem too abrupt when Ferguson abandoned trans-Atlanticism in late 2006, instead investing

his intellectual faith and energy in 'Chimerica', a necessary and apt alliance, as he saw it, between China and America, a veritable G2. Throughout his forays into 'provocative' imperial history, Ferguson had maintained his high reputation as an economic historian. 'So vast is America's looming fiscal crisis,' he had written as early as 2004, 'that it is tempting to talk about the fiscal equivalent of the perfect storm - or the perfect earthquake.' But now, awed by the 'rise of China', he saw 'the two halves of Chimerica' as wonderfully 'complementary':

*"Profligate West Chimericans cannot get enough of the gadgets mass produced in the East; they save not a penny of their income and are happy to borrow against their fancy houses. Parsimonious East Chimericans live more humbly and cautiously. They would rather save a third of their own income and lend it to the West Chimericans to fund their gadget habit - and keep East Chimericans in jobs."*

This was 'the secular summer of Sino-American symbiosis', Ferguson explained with typical exuberance in early 2007. 'Chimerica, despite its name, is no chimera.'

Speaking at Chatham House earlier this year, Ferguson claimed that Chimerica had appealed to him because 'it was a pun,' adding that it was not 'true anymore, if it ever was true'. What happened? As he put it, the 'West has suffered a financial crisis that has damaged not only the wealth of the Western world, but perhaps more importantly the legitimacy, the credibility, even the self-esteem of the West.' With the 'Chinese Century' now imminent, and Muslims knocking yet again at the gates of Europe, the important thing for British and American elites is to prepare themselves for a dramatically altered world. 'We are,' as he argues in *Civilisation*, 'living through the end of 500 years of Western ascendancy.'

This makes it especially deplorable, in Ferguson's view, that 'major universities have ceased to offer the classic "Western Civ" history course to their undergraduates.' Assaulted by politically correct intellectuals and cultural relativists, who regard 'all civilisations as somehow equal ... the grand narrative of Western ascent has fallen out of fashion' precisely when it is most needed. 'Maybe,' Ferguson proposes, 'the real threat is posed not by the rise of China, Islam or CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but by our own loss of faith in the civilisation we inherited from our ancestors.'

Ferguson's recent outbursts against Britain - 'Get me to the airport,' he told the *Telegraph*, 'I just want to get back to the US' - may have lost him some of his audience among right-wing broadsheets and tabloids in this country. But the anchors of America's cable news networks remain deferential. And Michael Gove, one of the Tories' me-too neocons, has enlisted him to help devise a new history curriculum. For those young men and women willing to swap their iPods for a reassuringly expensive lecture in 'Western Civ' he will also be available periodically at A.C. Grayling's New College of the Humanities. *Civilisation* gives a fair sample of the intellectual and spiritual tonic he would offer there.

Of the various things Tom Buchanan thinks 'go to make civilisation - oh, science and art, and all that', Ferguson is indifferent to the art, mocking Kenneth Clark's TV series, and his '*de haut en bas* manner'. He aims 'to be more down and dirty than high and mighty'. For him, civilisation is best measured by the ability to make 'sustained improvement in the material quality of life', and in this the West has 'patently enjoyed a real and sustained edge over the Rest for most of the previous 500 years'. Ferguson names six 'killer apps' - property rights, competition, science, medicine, the consumer society and the work ethic - as the operating software of Western civilisation that, beginning around 1500, enabled a few small polities at the western end of the Eurasian landmass 'to dominate the rest of the world'.

To explain the contingent, short-lived factors that gave a few countries in Western Europe their

advantage over the rest of the world requires a sustained and complex analysis, not one hell-bent on establishing that the West was, and is, best. At the very least, it needs the question to be correctly put. To ask, as Ferguson does, why the West broke through to capitalist modernity and became the originator of globalisation is to assume that this was inevitable, and that it resulted basically from the wonderfulness of the West, not to mention the hopelessness of the East.

Needless to say, most contemporary scholars of global history do not hold the West and the Rest in separate compartments. Far from developing endogenous advantages in splendid isolation from the Rest, Western Europe's 'industrious revolution', which preceded the Industrial Revolution, depended, as Jan de Vries and other historians have shown, on artisanal industries in South and East Asia. Contrary to Ferguson's Hegelian picture of stagnation and decline, China and Japan enjoyed buoyant trade and experienced a consumer boom as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The pioneering work of the Japanese historian Hamashita Takeshi describes a pre-European Asia organised by China's trans-state tributary network, demonstrating that there were many other centres of globalisation in the early modern world apart from those created by Western Europe. In *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*, which synthesises much recent scholarship on the 'extra-European origins of the modern European and American worlds', C.A. Bayly shows that longstanding Chinese business clans were as important as bourgeois capitalists in Hamburg and New York in spreading world trade across South-East Asia. Ferguson should know some of this, since he endorsed Bayly's book when it appeared as 'a masterpiece' that renders 'parochial' all other histories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As in Ferguson's other books, a vast bibliography trails the main text of *Civilisation*, signalling the diligent scholar rather than the populist simplifier. But he suppresses or ignores facts that complicate his picture of the West's sui generis efflorescence. Arguing that the Scientific Revolution was 'wholly Eurocentric', he disregards contemporary scholarship about Muslim contributions to Western science, most recently summarised in George Saliba's *Islam and the Making of the European Renaissance*. He prefers the hoary prejudice that Muslim clerics began to shut down rational thought in their societies at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He brusquely dismisses Kenneth Pomeranz's path-breaking book *The Great Divergence*, asserting that 'recent research has demolished the fashionable view that China was economically neck to neck with the West until as recently as 1800.' But he offers no evidence of this fashion-defying research. Given his focus on the ineptitude and collapse of the Ming dynasty, you might think that their successors, the Qing, had for nearly two centuries desperately clung on in a country in irreversible decline rather than, as is the case, presided over a massive expansion of Chinese territory and commercial interests. Each of Ferguson's comparisons and analogies between the West and the Rest, reminiscent of college debating clubs, provokes a counter-question. The rational Frederick the Great is compared to the orientally despotic and indolent Ottoman Sultan Osman III. Why not, you wonder, to the energetic Tipu Sultan, another Muslim contemporary, who was as keen on military innovation as on foreign trade?

Foregoing cogent argument, Ferguson collects much quiz-friendly information. But he hasn't, to use his own unlovely computer jargon, organised his folders well. Reading about the consumer society, the app that apparently killed Communism, you suddenly come across 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalisms; the benefits of Western medicine segue into the French Revolution. For long periods in the book, the West as well as the Rest disappear under ex cathedra pronouncements which often turn out to be mind-bending non sequiturs. A triumphalist claim such as 'even the atheism pioneered in the West is making impressive headway' reveals an ignorance of the strong atheistic strain in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It is probably best to ignore the assertion that what the 1960s radicals 'were really after was free love'.

In this gallimaufry, there are useful things. It's true that pre-modern Europe's fierce antagonisms

engendered technological innovation at a time when the great empires of Asia were unchallenged, even if this is hardly an idea that should be credited to Charles Murray, a co-author of *The Bell Curve*. Asian leaders and intellectuals, as mute here as in all Ferguson's books, were the keenest analysts of Europe's enhanced capacity to kill, as well as of its innovation of nation-statehood. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, an Indian Muslim traveller to Europe in 1800, was among the first Asians to point out that, required to fight on sea as well as on land, and to protect their slave plantations in the Caribbean, the British had developed the most sophisticated naval technologies. Fukuzawa Yukichi, the political theorist of Japan's modernisation, lamented in the 1870s that 'we have had too long a period of peace with no intercourse with outside. In the meantime, other countries, stimulated by occasional wars, have invented many new things such as steam trains, steam ships, big guns and small hand guns etc.'

Ferguson does not discuss how many of his apps, imposed on societies historically unprepared for them, could turn literally into killers. The raising of conscript armies, for instance, which helped protect national sovereignty and the expansion of political freedom in the West, could, and more often than not did, strengthen monarchical despotism in the East. Though essential to the growth of Western capitalist economies, notions of absolute property rights turned millions of communitarian peasants in Asia into cheaply hired hands. Modern medicine in the rising West may have been a boon, but it could only be darkly ambiguous in Asia as populations expanded without corresponding economic growth, pushing many into destitution.

As Bayly points out, European and American dominance over 'the world's economies and peoples' meant that, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'a large part of humanity had been converted into long-term losers in the scramble for resources and dignity.' Some of these truths creep into Ferguson's narrative, often while he is arguing something else. 'By 1913,' he writes, 'the world ... was characterised by a yawning gap between the West and the Rest, which manifested itself in assumptions of white racial superiority and numerous formal and informal impediments to non-white advancement. This was the ultimate global imbalance.' Indeed, and it decided the fate of the many postcolonial nation-states whose apparent failure today prompts calls for a new western empire.

Still, Ferguson remains defiantly loyal to his neoimperialist vision, scoffing at those who can still 'work themselves up into a state of high moral indignation over the misdeeds of the European empires'. 'Misdeeds there certainly were,' he admits and, as in *Empire*, he provides a very selective list that excludes the famines in Bengal, and the extermination of ten million people in the Congo. Frequently accused since *Empire* of underplaying the dark side of imperialism, Ferguson seems to have come up with a rhetorical strategy: to describe vividly one spectacular instance of brutality - he expends some moral indignation of his own on the slave trade - and then to use this exception to the general rule of imperial benevolence to absolve himself from admitting to the role of imperialism's structural violence in the making of the modern world.

The slave-trading, self-commemorating European conquerors of Asia and Africa, Naipaul writes, 'could do one thing and say something quite different because they had an idea of what they owed to their civilisation'. Ferguson, a retro rather than revisionist historian, tries to summon up some of that old imperial insouciance here. Consequently, his book is immune to the broadly tragic view - that every document of civilisation is also a document of barbarism - just as it is to humour and irony.

Even as he deplores the West's decay and dereliction, he sees signs everywhere of its victory: the Resterners are now paying Westerners the ultimate compliment by imitating them. Gratified by the fact that 'more and more human beings eat a Western diet' and 'wear Western clothes', Ferguson is hardly likely to bemoan the cultural homogeneity, or the other Trojan viruses - uneven development, environmental degradation - built into the West's operating software. Like his biographical subject,

Henry Kissinger, he is mesmerised by the Chinese – in his eyes a thrifty, shrewd people who, in colonising remote African lands and building up massive reserves of capital, seem to borrow from the grand narrative of the West’s own ascent. For Kissinger and Ferguson, China is, simultaneously, a serious threat to Western dominance and an opportunity for self-affirmation as it downloads – some might say, pirates or hacks – the West’s killer apps.

‘The Chinese have got capitalism,’ Ferguson exults towards the end of the book. At this point, one hardly expects him to explain whether this is an adequate description of an economy on whose commanding heights a one-party state perches, controlling the movement of capital and running the biggest banks and companies. Writing in 1920, Stoddard was more insightful: Asian peoples are ‘not merely adopting’, he wrote, ‘but adapting, white ideas and methods’. Today these include, in both China and India, some of the harshest aspects of American-style capitalism: the truncation of public services, deunionisation, the fragmenting and lumpenisation of urban working classes, plus the ruthless suppression of the rural poor. But in populous countries you can always find what you seek and Ferguson can’t be too worried about these killer apps imported from the contemporary West. He must move on quickly to his next intellectual firework. Did we know that there are more practising Christians in China than in Europe? Ferguson has met many Chinese ready to attest to Protestant Christianity’s inexorable rise and its intimate link to China’s economic growth. In Wenzhou, the ‘Asian Manchester’, he comes across a Christian CEO, who strikes him as ‘the living embodiment of the link between the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic’.

The reheated Weberism – a sign of Ferguson’s nostalgia for the intellectual certainties of the summer of 1914 – turns into another lament for Western civilisation, whose decline is proclaimed everywhere by the fact that the churches are empty, taxes on our wealth are high, the ‘thrifty asceticism’ of Protestants of yore has been lost, and ‘empire has become a dirty word.’ ‘All we risk being left with,’ he writes, ‘are a vacuous consumer society and a culture of relativism.’ And it is with some dark pseudo-Gibbonian speculations about the imminent collapse of the West that *Civilisation* ends.

‘Something,’ Nick Carraway says of Tom Buchanan, ‘was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart.’ ‘Western hard power,’ Ferguson blurts out in *Civilisation*, ‘seems to be struggling’; and the book exemplifies a mood, at once swaggering, frustrated, vengeful and despairing, among men of a certain age, class and education on the Upper East Side and the West End. Western Civilisation is unlikely to go out of business any time soon, but the neoimperialist gang might well face redundancy. In that sense, Ferguson’s metamorphoses in the last decade – from cheerleader, successively, of empire, Anglobalisation and Chimerica to exponent of collapse-theory and retailer of emollient tales about the glorious past – have highlighted broad political and cultural shifts more accurately than his writings. His next move shouldn’t be missed.

## **Pankaj Mishra**

\* Published under the title “Watch this man” in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 33 No. 21 · 3 November 2011, pages 10-12.

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n21/pankaj-mishra/watch-this-man>

---



## Letters

Vol. 33 No. 22 · 17 November 2011

### From Niall Ferguson

It is not my habit to reply to hostile book reviews, but a personal attack that amounts to libel is another matter. Pankaj Mishra purports to discuss my book *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*, but in reality his review is a crude attempt at character assassination, which not only mendaciously misrepresents my work but also strongly implies that I am a racist (LRB, 3 November).

Mishra begins by insinuating a resemblance between me and the American racial theorist Theodore Lothrop Stoddard. Stoddard, the author of *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920), was an out-and-out racist, a firm believer in 'Aryan' racial superiority, an opponent of unrestricted immigration and a Nazi sympathiser. Mishra describes my book *The Pity of War* as 'Stoddardesque'. He goes on to say that my 2003 book *Empire* 'belonged recognisably to the tradition of ... "white people's histories"' and asserts that the book 'celebrated ... pith-helmeted missionaries'. Of my new book he says that I sound 'like the Europeans ... who "wanted gold and slaves"' and that I feel 'nostalgia for the intellectual certainties of the summer of 1914'.

As those who know me or who have read my work can attest, Mishra's insinuation that I am a racist could scarcely be further from the truth. Unwittingly, he sabotages his own argument by quoting my words in *Civilisation*: 'By 1913 ... the world ... was characterised by a yawning gap between the West and the Rest, which manifested itself in assumptions of white racial superiority and numerous ... impediments to non-white advancement. This was the ultimate global imbalance.' This is hardly a ringing endorsement of white supremacy. Mishra might also have quoted this passage from the same book:

The idea that the success of the United States was contingent on racial segregation was nonsense. It was quite wrong to believe, as [George] Wallace did, that the United States was more prosperous and stable than Venezuela or Brazil because of anti-miscegenation laws and the whole range of colour bars that kept white and black Americans apart in neighbourhoods, hospitals, schools, colleges, workplaces, parks, swimming pools, restaurants and even cemeteries. On the contrary, North America was better off than South America purely and simply because the British model of widely distributed private property rights and democracy worked better than the Spanish model of concentrated wealth and authoritarianism. Far from being indispensable to its success, slavery and segregation were handicaps to American development.

I could with ease cite many more passages conveying my own contempt for theories of racial difference. Indeed, the central theme of my book *The War of the World* - which Mishra does not mention - is the immense harm done by such theories in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the very least, Mishra owes me a public apology for his highly offensive and defamatory allegation of racism.

Not content with libelling me, Mishra also systematically misrepresents my new book, falsely alleging a whole series of omissions. He claims that in *Civilisation* I disregard 'Muslim contributions to Western science'; in fact, I discuss them in some detail. He asserts that I 'offer no evidence' for my claim that China was very far from being economically neck to neck with the West in 1800. In fact, the point is footnoted and the work of two Chinese scholars, Guan Hanhui and Li Daokui, clearly referenced; I also provide Angus Maddison's figures for per capita income. Mishra alleges that 'Asian leaders and intellectuals' are 'mute here as in all Ferguson's books' and that I do not discuss their growing awareness of Western predominance. In fact, I devote three pages each to the Ottoman and Japanese responses to Western ascendancy. Gandhi is quoted at length. He is no more

'mute' here than in *Empire* or *War of the World*. Mishra says I don't mention the genocidal policies pursued by the Belgian rulers of the Congo: in fact, they are referred to twice. He claims that I do not discuss how Western innovations, when 'imposed on societies historically unprepared for them, could turn literally into killers'. Yet my discussions of the use of modern artillery in Chapter 2, and railways and 'eugenics' in Chapter 4, do precisely that.

Mishra also writes, gratuitously, that I am 'immune to ... humour and irony'. This is clearly his problem, not mine. He completely misses the point that the term 'Chimerica' coined by myself and Moritz Schularick in 2006 was from the outset - as the original article made clear - a pun on the word 'chimera', because we (correctly) regarded the post-1998 Chinese-American economic relationship as ephemeral, as well as detrimental to global stability. My remark that Philip Bobbitt's last book would be 'read with pleasure by men of a certain age, class and education from Manhattan's Upper East Side to London's West End' was scarcely intended as unalloyed praise. And the irony was surely unmissable in the line about my membership of the 'neoimperialist gang'. Or does Mishra imagine that Max Boot and I meet in New York to compare pith helmets?

The *London Review of Books* is notorious for its left-leaning politics. I do not expect to find warm affection in its pages. Much of what I write is simply too threatening to the ideological biases of your coterie. Nevertheless, this journal used, once, to have a reputation for intellectual integrity and serious scholarship. Pankaj Mishra's libellous and dishonest article brings the LRB as well as himself into grave disrepute.

I am, I repeat, owed an apology.

### **Niall Ferguson**

Harvard University

**Pankaj Mishra writes:** Niall Ferguson's strenuous attempts to distinguish himself from Stoddard - which make him flag his differences with, of all people, George Wallace - are misplaced. Hardly anyone is a racist in the Stoddardian sense today, even if they raise the alarm against Muslim 'colonisers' of a 'senescent' Europe, or fret about feckless white Americans being outpaced by hard-working Asian-Americans. Ferguson is no racist, in part because he lacks the steady convictions of racist ideologues like Stoddard. Rather, his writings, heralding an American imperium in 2003, Chimerica in 2006, and the 'Chinese Century' in 2011, manifest a wider pathology among intellectuals once identified by Orwell: 'the instinct to bow down before the conqueror of the moment, to accept the existing trend as irreversible'.

Ferguson's tendency to say whatever seems resonant and persuasive at any given hour is again on display in his response to my review. 'Chimerica, despite its name,' he asserted in 2007, 'is no chimera.' He now tells us that the word was always meant to be a pun. And that he hadn't offered 'unalloyed praise' to Philip Bobbitt's book when he described it as 'simply the most profound book' on American foreign policy 'since the end of the Cold War'.

Faulted for insisting that the Scientific Revolution was 'wholly Eurocentric', he points to his discussion of the Muslim contribution to science in the first centuries of Islam. Charged with uncouthly dismissing Kenneth Pomeranz's classic study *The Great Divergence*, he now unearths a footnote which actually refers to an unpublished paper by two obscure Chinese scholars. He also misrepresents my argument about the devastation caused by his beloved 'killer' apps in non-Western societies; I referred specifically to apparently benevolent 'apps' like property rights rather than actual 'killers' like artillery.

Needless to say, Ferguson's few (and mostly pejorative) references to Gandhi don't compensate for

his suppression of Asian and African voices in his books. More revealingly, he thinks that two vaguely worded sentences 15 pages apart in a long paeon to the superiority of Western civilisation are sufficient reckoning with the extermination of ten million people in the Congo. I am guilty, however, of failing to find the 'surely unmissable' irony in Ferguson's cheerleading of 'neoimperialist' wars.

---

---

**P.S.**

\* We hope you enjoyed reading this free book review from the London Review of Books. Subscribe now to access every article from every fortnightly issue of the London Review of Books, including the entire archive of over 12,500 essays and reviews.