

Review of *How the West Won* by Rodney Stark

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How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity. By Rodney Stark. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014. 432 pages. \$27.95.

A generation ago, historian Rodney Stark observes, most American colleges and universities eliminated their freshmen courses in “Western Civilization.” There was a good reason for this. Fueled by an arrogant ethnocentrism, these courses tended to assume a privileged position for Western culture while ignoring or implicitly deprecating all the others. Clearly this was unacceptable in our pluralistic and arguably more enlightened era. Ironically, the result of the change in policy, Stark writes, is that Americans are “increasingly ignorant of how the modern world came to be. Worse yet, they are in danger of being badly misled by a flood of absurd, politically correct fabrications, all of them popular on college campuses.”

Stark is a merry iconoclast who has written a slashing, fun book. He delights in demolishing the false or at least suspect truths that often pass for conventional wisdom on college campuses—and presumably everywhere else, too. His chief targets are not just the inevitable distortions of a campus culture dominated by political correctness. He also takes on falsities that were common even when “Western Civilization” classes were in their heyday, such as the overemphasis on art and literature and the under emphasis on the key importance of Christianity. Most importantly, Stark wants to explain why Western civilization has succeeded in producing the scientific and technological advances of modernity while other cultures have not.

Most people think of the successive empires that existed in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt as the high water marks of developing civilization, but Stark takes a different view. For him they tended to drain essential resources from the huge regions that they dominated, strangling creativity and producing mass misery in order to fund splendid public-works projects (for example, the pyramids). These were largely stagnant cultures that had little use for scientific discoveries or technological innovations. In contrast, the small city-states of Greece produced startling innovations in almost every area: politics, philosophy, literature, and science.

“The ancient Greeks,” he explains, “took the single most significant step toward the rise of Western science when they proposed that the universe is orderly and governed by underlying principles that the human mind could discern through observation and reason.” Because early Christian thinkers believed in a rational creator, they embraced the Greek devotion to reason. Moreover, they added to this a belief that history is progressive. Together, these ideas laid the foundations for all subsequent Western scientific and technological developments. Other cultures, following different philosophical and theological principles, largely rejected the possibility of either science or progress.

Stark devotes every chapter to correcting common historical misconceptions: the fall of the Roman Empire was not a tragedy but an immense benefit to humankind; there were no “Dark Ages” since this period was one of remarkable technological advance; the “Scientific Revolution” of the seventeenth century was actually not a revolution but a culmination; and so forth. Galloping through history at a break-neck pace, Stark can make some questionable generalizations of his own even while debunking the more widely accepted generalizations that he despises. Nevertheless, this is a thoughtful and needed book. In fact, Stark is often simply popularizing what professional historians have been discovering or debating in recent years—a task, sadly, no longer performed by professors teaching Western Civ.