

# The wealth and poverty of nations book review

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



David Landes book, *The Wealth And Poverty Of Nations*: why some are so rich and some so poor is arguably the most hotly debated economic book of our time, which seeks to explain the rise of Europe and why some nations easily achieved immense economic success while others continued being mired in poverty. Landes comes out as a witty author who is rich in anecdotal evidence, an astonishing range of intellectual information and a piercing analysis in regard as to why some countries command a substantially amount of wealth and economic supremacy while others have been entangled lives of poverty for centuries. David Landes explains these economic differences by comparing the historical long-term economic state of various regions of the world especially Europe, China, Japan and the Arab world. However, in the recent years, non-European states particularly China and Asianists have sparked intensified debates challenging and questioning the validity of the long accepted explanations for the West and European economic domination. In this paper, I will respond to Landes arguments about the western world and to his major claim about the position of China and give my views as to whether his argument can still hold a place in our modern world.

In his book, Landes attributes the huge economic success in European nations to their unique cultural values, their political structures and their social institutions. He asserts that the European success was entirely “internally” driven by these mentioned forces (Landes, 1998, p44). Landes argues that, For the past one thousand years, Europe and the western world in general have been the prime movers of modernity, inventions and development. According to Landes, this can be attributed to the exceptional

path that Europe took, which was different from the rest of the world. The world supremacy domination by Europe traces its root to the Portuguese fleet led by Vasco D Gama in the circumvention of Africa and the entire nations along the Indian Ocean. These Portuguese Sailors were superior to anyone that they found in their voyage. Landes claims that it is for this reason why Europe was able to plant itself everywhere in the world within the reach of the sailors thus positioning Europe as a more superior nation as compared to many other nations.

David Landes believes that the Industrial Revolution was the natural source of growth of the European economy and commerce, technological advancements and the ultimate capital accumulation. He acknowledges it as important but disregard it to being the central role in the rise of Europe and the west. He argues that in comparison to the Asian and Chinese countries, the west is far much propelled by the industrial revolution and the accompanying technological advancements as compared to china. " The interruption of Islamic and Chinese intellectual and technological advancements, not only the cessation of improvement but the institutionalization of the stoppage" (Landes, 1998, p200). However. As much as Landes would want to depict the Chinese stagnation and European economic explosion, historians have also provided evidence that leads to the contradictory conclusions since the Chinese voyages had also reached the eastern coast of Africa by the year 1500; the same period Vasco Da Gama was sailing in the east coast of Africa. Landes depicts non-European societies as ones that have stagnant economies and are backward technologically. To lands, there is no innovative science outside Europe. He believes that

innovative and useful technology spread from one direction, from Europe, to the rest of the world.

Though he clearly and logically explains his arguments, to some extent, I do not agree with David Landes argument on why the West appears economically superior than the East. I perceive it as an argument full of Eurocentrism. The Chinese have in the past decade proven that their superiority in terms of both the economy and technological creativity and innovations. Responding to Landes claim on the position of China, his claim cannot hold a place in our modern world. With a population of 1.3 billion people, China has become the second largest economy in the world with an immense influence in the global economic trend. It has become a giant in technology unlike Lande's assumption that it is a country which is economically and technologically stagnant. Landes failed to analyze comparatively the technologies of the different regions, instead he has focused and put more emphasis on just a single region of his study in his book. For instance China did not have any given specific technological variants as a result of their cultural flow as Landes puts it, instead he should have focused on the contingent factors such as availability of resources and social patterns that would affect technology and make it to occur or appear more practical in one area more than other areas.

If I was to address the relative global situation of 2012 based on Landes book, I would place less emphasis on the impact of culture to our economy unlike how Lande's put it. Advancements in technology were the major reasons why some nations performed better in the 2012 global situation and therefore, David Landes explanation about the superiority of a nation as a

result in advancing in technology would still be maintained. In his argument, Landes focuses on European exceptionalism, making it appear as if everything in regard to economic development was solely a western invention. I would shun away from such notions since, unlike the 18th and 19th centuries upon which Landes tries to base his arguments from, the world has nowadays become a global village where all countries have been positioned in a way that they can compete with each other both economically, socially and politically.

In conclusion, Landes's approach offers very little new insights into the historical 'rise of the west'. He is focused on the insistence on cultural superiority and giving examples that fail to drive us away from the problem of teleology. Therefore, *The Wealth And Poverty Of Nations: why some are so rich and some so poor*, in my final analysis, is more of a polemical integration of a theory and a previous research than an original work of historical analysis. I do not agree with David Landes use of technology and culture to explain the western economic supremacy. His argument about culture are essential. Landes does not situate and demonstrate historically how the social institutions, cultural attributes and Europe's technological accomplishments were advantageous to their nations in a particular historical context. Landes explanations on why Europe continues to experience, and will continue to experience enormous economic growth while other non-European nations wallow in economic stagnation and recession is simply a display of Eurocentrism and is traditional in nature.

## References

Top of Form

Landes, D. S. (1998). The wealth and poverty of nations: Why some are so rich and some so poor. New York: W. W. Norton.

Bottom of Form