

# How the west came to dominate the world after 1700 essay example

[Countries](#), [England](#)



## **ABSTRACT**

In *The Origins of the Modern World: Fate and Fortune in the Rise of the West*, Robert Marks sets himself the task of explaining how the Western imperial powers came to dominate the world by 1900 while one powerful empires like China and India went into relative and then absolute decline. His answers are not exactly new or unexpected, since science, technology and industry gave the West an economic and military advantage over the older empires in Asia and the Americas that it exploited fully and ruthlessly, leading to the great gap between the wealthy and poor nations that still exists today.

In his brief history of the modern world, *The Origins of the Modern World: Fate and Fortune in the Rise of the West*, Robert Marks covers the well-known ground of attempting to explain how the West came to rule most of the world by 1900, and his answers are very familiar ones. Its key advantages were in science, technology and modern industry powered by steam and electricity, and it used its military and economy power to conquer and control the rest of the world. This forced other non-European states like Japan to attempt to copy these new developments or risk being turned into colonies and dependencies. Had it not been for the European Civil War (or Second Thirty Years War) of 1914-45, Britain and France might still be the leading world empires, but their self-destruction opened the door to the U. S. becoming the global capitalist hegemon.

In Chapter 4 (The Industrial Revolution) Marks asserts that the key dividing line between the modern world and the economic and biological 'old regimes' was the creation of industrial capitalism in Britain, the U. S. and other Western nations in the period from 1750-1900. Britain's new textile

industry led the way as the country's rulers sought out new markets and sources of raw materials in Asia, Africa and the Americas, in a pattern that would become increasingly familiar in the modern era. European powers developed the markets in labor, land and capital and used their economic surpluses to invest in technological 'improvements' in agriculture and manufacturing that India, China and the other older empires were unwilling or unable to duplicate (Marks 100-01). Had it not been for this revolutionary break with the old order, "we all might still be living in the biological old regime", with its low levels of development and high birth and death rates (Marks 102). Britain, France and the other Western imperial powers quickly translated their scientific and economic advantages into military power as they conquered most of the world, such as Britain's seizure of Hong Kong from China after the Opium War of 1839-42.

As Marks points out in Chapter 5 on "The Gap" that exists in the modern world, the older empires China and India were not yet lagging so hopelessly far behind the West in 1700 that they were in danger of being colonized. Even at that relatively late date, they still accounted for about 70% of global GNP, but this had fallen to less than 10% by 1900, while the U. S. and Europe accounted for 80% by that time (Marks 152). In economics, at least, clearly there had been "a great reversal in world history" during those 200 years, and the effects of this power shift and still quite evident to any informed observer (Marks 153). These colonial and semi-colonial dependencies, which would become known as the 'Third World' after 1945, had mostly rural-agrarian economies, high levels of population growth and mass poverty, combined with low levels of industrialization, education and scientific and

technological innovation.

Chapter 6 then goes on to deal very briefly with the very well-known story of how the European empires and their Japanese imitator lost the position of dominance to the United States after the thirty years' crisis of 1914-45. All of the important scientific and technological developments in the world in the 20th Century, including computers, electronics, nuclear power, jet aircraft, radar and the automobile were pioneered by the West, along with the industrial methods to mass produce them. All of these developments in the 'second wave' of industrialization were powered by "vast quantities of cheap fossil fuel", which made control of the Middle East and other oil-producing areas a vital strategic and economic concern (Marks 155). At the same time, the application of the new scientific and industrial developments to warfare made it far more costly and destructive, which is why the 20th Century turned out to be an era of extreme "war and violence" in which 200 million people died in wars, revolutions or acts of genocide (Marks 156).

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, all the European empires were in ruins and bankrupt, and this imperial civil war cleared the path for the U. S. to become the global capitalist hegemon. It was the big winner from the 20th Century world wars, and used its new-found power to attempt to reshape the world in its own image. All the international institutions of the global capitalist system were created by the U. S., and this system has benefitted the ruling elites of the Western world greatly, while also increasing the gap between the rich and the poor more than ever. These radical changes in the world order were basically the product of the modern innovations in science, technology, industry and military power, and those

countries that feel behind early in these areas have generally stayed behind, forced to play ' catch-up' with the West as best they can or risk losing their independence and falling hopelessly behind, and this is also the reason why the life opportunities of most people on earth today are far more limited and grim than those for the fortunate few born into the middle and upper classes in the Western nations.

## **REFERENCES**

Marks, R. (2007). *The Origins of the Modern World: Fate and Fortune in the Rise of the West*, 2nd Edition. Rowman & Littlefield.