The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous

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“There are two kinds of people in the world....” How often do we hear that? Joseph Henrich’s WEIRDest People book makes that claim and takes up seven hundred pages to defend his classification. He argues that, today, there are two kinds of people in the world: ones that are WEIRD, and all the rest. In case you wondered, I can predict rather comfortably that my readers are numbered among the WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialized, rich (by global standards), and democratic (even if you are a Republican).

The historian William McNeill (1997) told us that distinguishing the West from the rest has a long history which takes many forms. One form it took was distinguishing the “New World” from the old one. But even there “the West” excluded more (and less) than just the Old World. Central and South America were part of the New World but for the past seventy years have more often been thought of as part of the global South rather than the West. Today, parts of the Old World—western Europe in particular—are seen as parts of the West. And what about Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong? Western nations are seen to be industrialized, prosperous and rich. They also have more democratic forms of governance than the rest, a fact that was often mentioned alongside their better educated populations. In the post-World War Two era, of course, free market-oriented economies were often touted as being central to the West’s phenomenal progress relative to the rest of the world. Today, however, the gap is being closed.

Why, then, write a book that revisits the origins of the division between the West and the rest? After all, we have a stream of books that already do this, with the success of the West most often attributed to its economic and political institutions (North & Thomas, 1976; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Allen, 2011), or culture (McCloskey, 2007, 2010, 2016; Mokyr, 2018), that could have been replicated elsewhere, but were not. While these authors emphasize different components of this mix, their arguments, taken together, lead to the conclusion that the West succeeded in ways that other parts of the world did not because they
provided the cultural, political and economic conditions for success on a scale not seen elsewhere in human history. Whether or not those advantages will be sustained is a lingering question.

Henrich seems to agree with the arguments made by the authors cited above, but with a twist. He couples the innovation that the economic institutional evolution of the West allowed with changes that shifted several features of the West's cultural psychology. Thus, his argument is more psychological than political, more focused on family rather than markets, and more genetic than cultural. Starting at the fundamental unit of society—the family—Henrich argues that the first step in the emergence of the West was the "imposition of monogamous marriage and the ending of arranged marriages" (p. 467). He then traces the steps taken over the millennium between 300 and 1200 AD that solidified the "Marriage and Family Program" in Catholic and Orthodox doctrine and practice (pp. 168–171). Several features of the West’s cultural psychology emerged out of its unique marriage arrangements. Women began to have options, starting with religious vocations and then expanding into education, markets and other roles that allowed them both to delay marriage and to more frequently continue their other roles even after they were married. Young people became more mobile and were able to be educated both more frequently and better. The Reformation fostered the emergence of other new faiths that were both more sympathetic to economic change and also fostered literacy, industriousness and a pragmatic outlook. Modern cities emerged. Markets moved from local to regional to continental to global. Economic prosperity, Henrich argues, is built not only on market-supporting institutional frameworks but also on certain types of families and the cultural and legal frameworks within which families operate.

The breadth and depth of the historical process of cultural and genetic change that Henrich outlines for us contributes to the book’s length—he can pile argument upon argument in his way as well as McCloskey does in hers. But the argument that separates his work from the others mentioned here is the link he draws between the cultural changes and the genetic evolution of people in the West. Henrich argues that culture and genetics adapt together to new environments, and that “to understand people’s psychology we have to consider not only our genetic inheritance but also how our minds have adapted ontogenetically and culturally to the local technologies and institutions…” (p. 469). Figure 14.1 on p. 472, provides a synopsis of the story Henrich tells. It
starts with the heritage of the competition between Christianity and other religions. Within Christian traditions, Henrich says that the combination of monogamous marriage, no marriage to kin nor arranged marriage, an independent but local residence for newly-weds, inheritance by testament, no adoption, and the defense of individual ownership (the social consequences of the “Marriage and Family Program” mentioned earlier) formed the cultural basis upon which WEIRD-ness, and hence prosperity, emerged. The social consequences were dissolution of intensive kinship, leading to weaker ties to extended kin, weaker ties to specific lands or locations, mobility following the economic success of the family over their lifetime, and greater dependence on the Church and other non-familial, social safety nets. The combination of these social and psychological consequences assisted, Henrich says, the rise of impersonal markets, and the emergence of voluntary associations that had to compete both with each other and with businesses. Early on, the competition between towns, guilds and monasteries increased mobility. As modernity increased, the mobility of labor led to greater urbanization and competition even in other settings, including that between cities, and among universities and non-profit associations.

Psychological consequences followed these changes. We come to trust others when engaging them in market settings, in part because of the impersonal nature of the interaction, but also because of the law’s impartiality. Our social interactions encourage patience, and positive-sum thinking over the long term, which leads us to delay discounting, be thrifty with time rather than things that took time to create, and be willing to cast aside past investments and purchases in favor of the new. On the legal and constitutional front, Henrich argues that the cultural and economic transformation that the West underwent also gave us a heritage of representative government, law and religion that is individualistic, and an inherent disposition to trust that innovation will be positive for individuals and for society.

A book of this scope is necessarily open to criticisms, both about specific points and the generality of the overall argument. I will pick two specific points, both of which are classic arguments he seems to reverse. The first is the role of Protestantism, which he undersells; the second is the role of guilds, which he oversells.

Henrich does not ignore the role of Protestantism, nor the ethic it is said to have inspired. In his overall argument, he considers it one among several contributors to the longer-term story he tells of the rise of the
“Marriage and Family Plan” (MFP), mentioned earlier, that encouraged delayed satisfaction and helped people commit to longer-term projects. For Henrich, that compact was in place long before the Protestant revolution, and provided the background context for Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic” (Weber, 1930). But Henrich prefaces his comments about Protestantism with reference to the Brethren of the Common Life, a movement that started during the fourteenth century in the Netherlands and Germany, spreading literacy and preaching a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Both Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus were associated with the Brethren in their early life. Henrich’s point is clear—the Reformation is a latecomer to the party, building upon what had already been established in the MFP. It was both “a consequence and a cause of people’s changing psychology,” and acted more like a “booster shot” for the WEIRD psychology already formed, enhancing its economic and political impact (Henrich, 2020, pp. 423–427, emphasis in the original).

Henrich’s treatment of guilds works in the other direction. His account emphasizes their importance in the cultural context in which the WEIRD psychology emerged. But this argument downplays significantly the role of guilds as gatekeepers to markets, on both the demand and supply sides. For example, guilds limited access to local markets on the supply side—limiting external suppliers, requiring lengthy apprenticeships, and defending stringent licensing requirements; while also encouraging growth of demand for their products. From the standpoint of the existing authorities, market conditions in a guild society helped to protect the MFP while also allowing political control of economic conditions. From the standpoint of innovators and new entrants, however, guilds operated as a protector of existing producers and capital investments, backed by the strength of city officials.

Overall, I would encourage those interested in the great debates of economic history, psychology and economics, and human evolution to read Henrich’s book. But with a critical eye to how the breadth of his study can be balanced with work from other perspectives.

References


Governments in Economic History series. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.


