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Basking in the fading glory: Latest narratives of Western triumph and decline

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Abstract

Each nation or civilisation must have a self-characterising narrative that explains its uniqueness or exceptionality. Thus, all Western colonial empires produced intricate stories of their own superiority, particularly in relation to the colonised nations. Although today those discourses are universally dismissed and discussed almost exclusively as instances of prejudice, racism and pseudo-science, the innate need that produced them has not disappeared. In fact, such factors as the current financial crisis or the rise of China induced a fresh wave of intellectual reflection on what constitutes “the West” and how to define it. Many recently published books try to produce new interpretations of the genesis of the present Western cultural dominance. This paper analyses two such very prominent examples. The first of them is Niall Ferguson’s *Civilisation: The West and the Rest* (2011), and the second is Ian Morris’s *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal about the Future* (2010). As the paper argues, both books are not only superb examples of a wider intellectual effort to redefine “the West” in the era of post-colonialism, globalisation and multiculturalism, but they can also be seen as ways in which Western (and particularly Anglophone) anxieties of loss of influence and marginalisation are expressed and dealt with.

Keywords: *China, civilisation, the West, narrative*