“Western Civilization?? I think it would be a good idea.”

--Gandhi

Course Objectives:

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to major themes in world history since 1492. At the same time, the course poses itself as a challenge to the idea that “the West” and “1492” are important to a broader understanding of world history. The course is split into three units. The first unit—Guns, Germs, and Steel—takes its name from the book that will be the centerpiece of our discussions. The constitution of the world that we live in—the haves and the have-nots, the “rich” and the “poor”—is not random or accidental. Human history was, and continues to be, influenced by forces that are largely beyond our control—geography, climate, disease, and so on. In short, the question we will be trying to answer in the first part of the course is: Why did human development proceed at such different rates on different continents, and how does this impact us today?

The second unit—Contextualizing “The Rise of the West”—compares and contrasts the economies and societies of Ming China with those of imperial Spain, emphasizing cross-cultural contacts in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, respectively. We will examine the social and cultural influences that shaped each of these societies during their eras of “discovery.” We will also look at long-term trends in the economies of each society. Many scholars now argue that China dominated the world economy until at least the middle of the eighteenth century. This argument destabilizes the idea of Western dominance since 1500 and calls into question the very notion of the untrammeled “rise of the West.” By carefully examining the Spanish conquest of the Americas and its impacts in the broader world, we will be able to better contextualize the historical significance of 1492 and Western colonialism.

The third unit—The Emergence of a “Modern” World?—deals with the influence of the Christian West on the world stage over the past 200 or so years. While a narrative history of the world will emerge, our primary concern will be the “—isms” that were by-products of the emerging “modern” world. These include capitalism, industrialism, Marxism, racism, imperialism, nationalism, and so on. Our goal will be to understand how these concepts have informed the histories of peoples and nations in a variety of comparative settings. Finally, in the last part of the semester we will examine collisions between “tradition” and “modernity,” “civilization” and “barbarity.” We will try to determine whether these concepts have any real meaning. Is one person’s “civilization”
another person’s “barbarity”? Can we even talk about a “modern” world without having the “backwardness” of “tradition” to measure it against? Returning to questions raised in the first section of the course, how “modern” or “civilized” is the West compared with other parts of the world? Is there really a “Clash of Civilizations” that defines our contemporary world?

**Procedures and Requirements:**

1) The course will ask you to concentrate your efforts on reading, writing, and discussion. As such, students will be expected to attend every class session and to participate actively in class discussions.

2) In order to benefit from class discussions, students must have completed assigned readings prior to the date that they will be discussed in class. On most days, the instructor will begin class with a short lecture and introduction of the day’s central questions. We will then discuss the issues as a class. The quality of each student’s participation in class discussion can influence the final grade.

3) There will be three exams during the semester. Exams will consist of short-answer identifications (20%) and essay questions (80%). The short-answer portion of your exams will be completed in class on the dates indicated on the syllabus. Your essay questions will be distributed on the day of the exam and completed at home. The essays should be typed, double-spaced. The following is the exam schedule:

   EXAM #1—Friday, October 1. 5 IDS, 1 essay (8 pages). Essays due on Monday, October 4. 30% of final grade.

   EXAM #2—Wednesday, October 27. 5 IDS, 1 essay (8 pages). Essays due on Monday, November 1. 30% of final grade.

   EXAM #3—Wednesday, December 13  three exam questions distributed. Each student must answer two that will be turned in during the exam period on December 18. IDS will be completed during the exam period. 8 IDS, 2 essays (5 pages each). 40% of final grade.

**Required Readings:**

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*
Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*
Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*
Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*
Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*
Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *A River Between*
Coursepack
Course Outline:

9/3—Introduction—Syllabus—What is world history? Space and orientation. Why is the world the way it is—socially, economically? What explains the inequities and differences that we see in the world? Why is the status of New Guinea fundamentally different from say, the United States, on the world stage? Yali’s question.

GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL

9/8—Where do we come from? Evolution versus creationism? Religion versus science? Bible, Popol Vuh, etc. How did humans come to populate the earth?

9/10—Patterns of migration? If Africa was the cradle of civilization, why is it that Europeans were eventually able to colonize Africa, rather than the other way around? READING: Diamond, 9-52; 376-401; Coursepack: John Noble Wilford, “A Fossil Unearthed in Africa Pushes Back Human Origins,” NY Times, July 11, 2002.


9/15—How does agricultural potential affect one’s life chances, especially in the era prior to global trade? What are the implications of crop domestication for human populations? How do crops spread after contact? READING: Diamond, 85-156

9/17—What are the implications of animal domestication on human populations? Utility of animals? How do animals spread? Case Study: Cattle and West Africa


9/22—What is the definition of “civilization”? Literacy and modern language diffusion. Is literacy a prerequisite for civilization? Case Study: The Talking Books


10/1—EXAM: Identifications in-class. Distribute take-home questions. Due on Monday, 10/4.

CONTEXTUALIZING “THE RISE OF THE WEST”: CHINESE DOMINANCE?

10/4—Confucianism and Patriarchy.


10/8—Finish movie.


10/20—Conquest, Collision, Discovery, or Encounter?: Europe v. Africa and the Americas. What was the nature of European exploration in Africa and the Americas? Was Columbus’ arrival in the Americas an exceptional historical event? READING: Clendinnen, 1-128


10/27—Identifications in-class. Take home exam due on Monday, November 1.
THE EMERGENCE OF A “MODERN” WORLD??


11/3—The Age of Revolutions. Case Study: The Haitian Revolution. What outside influences contributed to the Haitian Revolution? How important were these influences?


11/8—The Responses to Capital: Organized Labor and Marxism

11/10—Did Marxism go wrong? Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism


11/22—Case Study: The Irish Republican Movement: Origins and History

11/24—Video: “In the Name of the Father”

11/29—Finish video.

12/1—Nationalism and Genocide: Case Studies: The Balkans and Rwanda. READING: Singh, ALL.
12/3—The Balkans and Rwanda, continued.

12/5—The Global Village: Tradition v. Modernity—“A Reasonable Man”

12/8—“A Reasonable Man,” continued


12/15—Wrap up and review for exam.