On Method

“It is the fear of great history which has killed great history.”

—Edmond Faral

The Monroe Doctrine 1.0 and 2.0

The Monroe Doctrine 1.0 of 1823, named after President James Monroe, proclaimed a United States sphere of influence. This notice applied to the western hemisphere, primarily North America, and was intended primarily for Europe, specifically Spain. With perhaps the exception of Great Britain, which at one point united the British Isles, no power has ever before been able to dominate so thoroughly its own region as the United States. And with safe borders and security at home, the United States was free to extend its power throughout the world. Still, “she did not go abroad,” in the words of John Quincy Adams, President Monroe’s secretary of state, “in search of monsters to destroy.” But as the Pax Britannica gave way to the Pax Americana, America became a slayer of monsters, if an often ambivalent one.

Now fast forward to the end of 1991, when the implosion of the Soviet Union allowed the United States to emerge from the Cold War as the world’s sole superpower. Less than two years later, in November 1993, Europe would form a new United States—the European Union. At the same time, the original United States created in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) a continent-size free trade zone with its two North American neighbors, Canada and Mexico, and issued a sweeping post–Cold War policy statement, the Defense Planning Guidance of 1992, which globalized the Monroe Doctrine. In this Monroe Doctrine 2.0, the United States proclaimed that it would not brook the emergence of any new rival
or threat anywhere in the world—Asia, Africa, Europe, or the Americas. What followed was a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity—a globalization of the world’s economy and culture within an American-led, rules-based order. But this order has not gone unchallenged; since 1992 an increasingly reckless Russia, a declining power, and a steadily less cautious China, a rising power, both filled with revanchist ambitions and deep-seated grievances, have sought to challenge America’s unique unipolarity. Effectively confronting this dual threat will require the West’s best minds, political resolve, and sacrifice.¹

To put this moment and challenge into perspective, this book looks at America’s initial rise to power and considers what made its relatively short path to hemispheric dominance possible. Since it does this within a continental context, it begins with the conquest of the Aztec Empire of Mexico by Spain’s Hernán Cortés. But unlike a typical historical survey, this book tracks over time the sources of social power—the abilities of a particular society “to get things done,” in the archaeologist and historian Ian Morris’s apt formulation, including the projection of military force—by placing America’s rise in a continental as well as a transatlantic context. I end this study with James Monroe’s proclamation of hemispheric hegemony. The result is a not another national narrative of the early US republic, of which there are many, but a new North American history, one inclusive of Mexico, of which there are very few.²

For two centuries beginning in 1607 British North America was a theater of European rivalry and warfare, whereas Mexico, after its initial conquest by Spain in the early sixteenth century, enjoyed a nearly three-century-long Pax Hispanica. In both, North America’s relationship with Europe was determinative. I argue that after the wars of independence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this transatlantic relationship, or its absence in Mexico’s case, was if anything even more significant. In upper North America, Canada remained in and prospered as part of the British Empire. In middle North America, however, the emergent United States tried—first during the War of American Independence and again during the War of 1812, the so-called second war of independence—to dislodge Great Britain from the continent. It failed to do so, and there would be no third attempt to realize this important if elusive revolutionary goal. Instead the two nations—one an established power, the other a rising power—agreed to share the continent and its wealth, and the United States went on to flourish under the Pax Britannica. In short, the two nations avoided
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the Thucydides trap and effected instead a Thucydides escape. According to political scientist Graham T. Allison, a Thucydides trap snaps shut when an established power like Sparta, feeling threatened by a rising power like Athens, goes to war with it before, as it believes, it is too late. This concept is based on Thucydides’s thesis that Sparta’s fear of Athens’s growing power was the cause of the Peloponnesian War. Allison found that in the vast majority of cases in which a rising power has threatened a ruling power, the result has been war.3

The special relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States that originated in North America would later shape the entire Atlantic world. In lower North America, by contrast, Mexico succeeded in driving Spain out of the continent, a victory formalized by the Treaty of Córdoba on August 24, 1821. But in its triumph Mexico had incurred the enmity of a sullen and vindictive declining power. As Sparta had with Athens, Spain chose to suppress Mexico’s rise to power. Tragically, it succeeded, leaving North America deeply divided into Anglo- and Hispanospheres with different levels of social development, despite the continent’s shared civilization, geography, and Indigenous past. Mexico had traded security and subordination for isolation and vulnerability, and political turmoil, strife, and foreign invasion marked the century that followed its independence. These changing relationships and reversals of fortune reveal a rich as well as a tragic North American history, one largely hidden from view by the separate national and conventional histories of Mexico, Canada, and the United States.

While numerous histories of the continent of Europe exist, the continent of North America has largely failed to capture the historian’s imagination. The patrician scholars Francis Parkman and William H. Prescott are notable but qualified exceptions. Parkman charted the fall of New France and Prescott the rise of New Spain, both against a vast continental setting. Their contemporary George Bancroft also stressed the importance of the colonial period in his ten-volume history of the United States, which he framed in transatlantic as well as continental terms. The present volume, then, is a rare thing: a linear history of North America’s social development in both the Hispanosphere and Anglosphere viewed in toto, establishing a baseline in the continent’s prehistory before turning to the period from 1521 to 1823. More space is given to the Hispanosphere, since New Spain’s history was significantly longer than that of its colonial neighbors to the north.
What, then, is the main argument of this book? The story of the United States, in particular the story of the origins of the nation’s social power, cannot be told without that of its two continental neighbors, Canada and Mexico. These three countries form a whole—if a poorly understood whole—that is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. It is true that the United States would eventually dominate the continent—militarily, economically, and otherwise—and later the world, so much so that the stories of its two next-door neighbors have been all but lost in the shadow of the US colossus. But North America’s early rise as a regional power was very much conditioned by transcontinental, transpacific, and above all transatlantic factors. And while the United States profoundly shaped the history of Canada and Mexico, so too did Canada and Mexico—to say nothing of the influences of Europe and Asia on North America—shape US history. Any society’s social development is directly related to either its own social power or, just as crucially, the protective extension or destructive intrusion of the social power of other societies. This three-century narrative and analysis of the interrelationship of the three countries that make up North America, then, is organized around the concepts of social power and cultural evolution as well as the theme of exploration, a partly political, partly scientific cultural activity that is a prime example of social power and was the unique modus operandi of Europe’s territorial expansion.

Big History, or A Map of Time
This is a Big History—a history that seeks to unite natural and human history, geography and culture, from the Big Bang to this morning’s breakfast. Our place of interest, however, is much more modest: namely, the continent of North America. Our period is no less limited, confined as it is to the interval between the beginning of Europe’s military conquest of North America in 1521 and North America’s rise to parity with Europe in 1823, when the United States asserted a hemispheric hegemony in concert with Great Britain, which remained very much ensconced in Canada. Unlike its two continental neighbors, which fought for national independence, Canada sought its autonomy gradually and largely peacefully. Moreover, the postcolonial history of Anglo-American amity contrasts sharply with the postcolonial hostility between Spain and Mexico. These international relations would have profound implications for the continent. And while historians have sliced and diced humanity into any number of categories—race, class, gender, and so on—for analysis, the category of analysis here is
humanity itself: a single species but one differentiated by social development or cultural evolution (not to be confused with organic evolution, a very different thing!). I contend here that these differences in development are the principal drivers of modern history. And during our period, as we shall see, the North Atlantic world would experience not one but two major phases of sociocultural development: the Renaissance, when Europe recovered its classical inheritance and discovered a new world, and the Enlightenment, a transatlantic period of material and intellectual reform, which produced democratic revolutions in America and France.

**Geography and Culture**

The Spanish divided the Americas into an América Septentrional (North America) and an América Meridional (South America). The North America discussed as a historical entity here coincides with the geological definition of North America: that is, the North American tectonic plate, which notably does not include the countries of Central America or the islands of the Caribbean (the Greater and Lesser Antilles). What this place of our study does include is Mexico (along with the Yucatán Peninsula), the United States—the lower forty-eight adjoining states, plus the Alaska Peninsula and far northeastern Asia, across the Bering Strait—as well as mainland Canada and the Arctic islands. The North American plate also includes half of Iceland, a good part of Cuba, the Lucayan Archipelago, and all of Greenland, but this book will focus primarily on the three large, contiguous North American nations: Canada, the United States, and Mexico, each of which originated as a former settler colony of Europe but went on to become, and remain, fully sovereign. As a constitutional monarchy, Canada does possess the Westminster form of government and therefore retains a significant formal tie with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as well as the other Commonwealth realms, but it is otherwise entirely free and independent.

There exists an invidious view of the United States (and by extension Canada and Mexico), often expressed with a certain supercilious disdain, that it is a young country, fresh, as it were, off the turnip truck. “China’s civilization has been around far longer,” as Chinese ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai recently took pains to point out. The United States, like the nations of Canada and Mexico, may have been a recent creation, if not nearly as recent as Cui’s People’s Republic of China, which was founded in 1949. Still, the ambassador was right in one respect. China’s Confucian
roots are very old and predate by millennia the current Communist regime. But they are no older than the roots of Western civilization. The Spanish, the English, the French, the Dutch, and the Russians who came to North America all shared, to a greater or lesser extent, this ancient and underlying cultural unity or civilization—one based on three broad and very old traditions, which may be thought of as the three legs of a stool: the Greco-Roman, the Germanic, and the Judeo-Christian. And what was true of Europe was no less true of the civilization that Europeans transplanted to North America. Geographer Donald W. Meinig adds this insight: the Atlantic world was the “scene of a vast interaction rather than merely the transfer of Europeans onto American shores. Instead of a European discovery of a new world, we might better consider it as a sudden and harsh encounter between two old worlds that transformed both and integrated them into a single New World.”

One might argue that in North America’s social development, the cultural factors that underlaid New England, New France, and New Netherland as well as New Spain basically canceled one another out, making geography all the more significant. There is no question that the very different geographies of Mexico, Canada, and the United States have a great deal of explanatory power.

The great extent to which Mexico is mountainous, for example, is key to understanding the nation’s infrastructural and socioeconomic development. In fact, if Mexico were flattened out, its square mileage would exceed that of Asia. But due to its highly mountainous terrain, it has neither large swaths of land suitable for extensive railroad and highway networks nor long, navigable rivers like the St. Lawrence, Mississippi, Ohio, and Columbia. Mexico’s longest river, the Rio Grande—known in Spanish as the Río Bravo del Norte or simply Río Bravo (“Wild River”)—is indeed long, at 1,896 miles. But it is so shallow in most places as to be unnavigable, so of no use for the transportation of goods and peoples. The Sierra Madre Oriental, the Sierra Madre del Sur, and the Sierra Madre Occidental run diagonally, north to southeast, while the Sierra Nevada—the volcano belt—transverses south-central Mexico. Together, these ranges wall off the Altiplanicie Mexicana (the central Mexican plateau) separating a great many of Mexico’s cities, towns, and villages from the coasts. The large Yucatán Peninsula to the east and the long, skinny peninsula of Baja (lower) California to the west are in effect islands unto themselves, separated from Mexico proper by the gulfs
of Campeche and California, respectively. Mexican history is incomprehen-
sible without reference to this broken geography.6

In Canada geography is if anything even more important to the nation’s infrastructural and socioeconomic development. Only Russia has a larger area, and Canada faces three oceans—the Atlantic, the Arctic, and the Pacific—giving it the world’s longest coastline. Yet its population is comparatively small: only 38 million, roughly 10 percent that of its southern neighbor, the United States. And three-quarters of this population is huddled within the nation’s habitable zone, a narrow band along the Canadian-US border, scarcely one hundred miles wide. Above this zone lies the great white and largely empty north.

Northwestern Canada is drained by the Mackenzie River, which flows into the Beaufort Sea and forms North America’s second largest river system, after that of the Mississippi. The Mackenzie drains an area almost the size of Mexico. To the west of the Mackenzie Mountains lies the source of the Yukon River, at Lakes Atlin and Tagish in northern British Columbia. The Yukon then crosses the US-Canadian border, drains central Alaska, and finally empties into the Bering Sea, south of Norton Sound. On the southern end of British Columbia, the Columbia River originates at Columbia Lake, between the Canadian Rockies and the Selkirk Mountains; from there it flows south to the US Pacific Northwest, where it is joined by the Snake River before turning and rolling westward, forming the border between the US states of Washington and Oregon. The Columbia, which is 1,243 miles long, finally empties into the Pacific Ocean.

The significance of the great Laurentian Shield to Canadian history cannot be overstated. This vast cap of Precambrian rock, centered under the frigid waters of Hudson Bay, covers the eastern half of the country from the Great Lakes to the Arctic Ocean. Canada is rich in timber, fish—the Grand Banks off Newfoundland was once the richest cod fishery in the world—furs, and minerals, but relative to the United States it can boast of few farms because of the thin soils on this vast eroded plain. Canada’s fertile prairie provinces—Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta—lie between the rocky shield to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west.

The French found arable land to the east and south of the country in the St. Lawrence Valley, between the cities of Quebec (founded in 1608 by Samuel de Champlain) on the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Montreal in the continent’s interior. Montreal (from mont réal, “the royal mount,” the hill at
the city’s heart) was established in 1642 on a riparian island. The French seigneurs, or lords, sensibly divided their seigneuries (feudal territories) into long, narrow lots, a Norman practice. Each strip of land, which was worked by a farm family, ran down to the river, thereby offering many more points of riverfront access than would have been afforded by square or rectilinear lots. In this case, an adherence to Old World manorialism brought economy and efficiency to New World land use.

The United States of America, or simply America, encompasses the rich midsection of the North American continent, stretching from Cape Hatteras in North Carolina to Cape Mendocino in California. Its two very long coastlines—one fronting the Atlantic and the other the Pacific Ocean—are both crenulated by numerous harbors and bays, the eastern coast much more so than the western. The largest and most useful (for shipping) of these indentations include Cook Inlet, Puget Sound, San Francisco Bay, Massachusetts Bay, New York Harbor, and Chesapeake Bay.

The United States and Canada share the Great Lakes, a series of huge freshwater seas (Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario), except for Lake Michigan, which is entirely in the United States. Other great North American bodies of fresh water are, in the United States, the Great Salt Lake in Utah and Lake Okeechobee in Florida, and in Canada, Great Bear Lake and Great Slave Lake, as well as Lakes Athabasca, Reindeer, and Winnipeg. In the early colonial era, it should be noted, Mexico possessed its own remarkable, if shallow, lakes, high up in the Valley of Mexico, the largest being Lake Texcoco. These lakes were endorheic—that is, like the Humboldt Sink in Nevada or the Dead Sea in the Jordan Valley, they had no surface outlets to the sea—so flooding could follow heavy rains. To solve this chronic problem, the Spanish drained most of these bodies of water, at great human cost and expense, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They accomplished this impressive and environmentally transformative feat by connecting the waters of the Valley of Mexico to the Río Tula basin and thence to the Gulf of Mexico by means of a massive and labor-consuming hydraulic drainage system, the Desagüe de Huehuetoca.

The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has released satellite composite and cloud-free images of the United States at night, revealing a country clearly bisected along the hundredth meridian into two distinct patterns of illumination—a proxy measure of American adaptation to the continent’s environmental and climatic patterns. In 1878 John Wesley Powell, at the time one of the government’s foremost scientists,
warned Congress that the western half of the nation, outside of the Pacific Northwest, received less than twenty inches of rain a year. This amount was insufficient to support traditional rain-fed agriculture, as practiced in western Europe and transplanted to eastern North America. Powell’s inconvenient truth was angrily ignored by growth-minded western politicians who insisted that the westward movement could proceed on the old business-as-usual basis, provided the federal government agreed to fund irrigation projects in the nation’s arid lands, which covered some twenty states. In 1902 US president Theodore Roosevelt created a federal bureaucracy in Washington, DC, to reclaim the American West. These policies and projects, such as the Salt River Project in Arizona, profoundly altered the nation’s settlement and agricultural patterns.

What developed was what historian Gerald D. Nash has described as an “oasis civilization,” a region of large, isolated urban and population centers and corridors like Utah’s Wasatch Front, Colorado’s Front Range, or the Los Angeles–to–San Diego conurbation, separated by vast tracts of irrigated or empty lands. This pattern stands in strong contrast to those of the eastern half of the United States, as depicted by NASA’s cameras. (The current megadrought is testing the hydraulic basis of this oasis civilization.) While the night lights of the western United States stand in strong contrast to the thickly webbed illumination of the eastern half, they form a pattern very like that created by the scattered, relatively dimly lit human-built environments of western Canada and northern Mexico.

America shares long borders with Canada and Mexico. According to the US Geological Survey, which Powell helped to establish in 1879, the international boundary between America and its northern neighbor runs 3,987 miles from east to west. The Alaska–Canada border, which runs north to south, adds another 1,538 miles, making it the world’s longest international border at 5,525 miles. The US-Mexican border, which also runs east to west, is shorter, but still an impressive 1,933 miles. America shares with its northern and southern neighbors not only these long borders but also the surrounding borderland geography. The lines dividing the US grassland state of North Dakota and the Canadian grassland province of Manitoba, for example, and the US desert state of Arizona and the Mexican desert state of Sonora are clearly not natural but cultural—the products of diplomacy, purchase, or war.

As important as geography is, as Jared Diamond reminds us, it does not explain all the differences in social development. The gap in social
development between Ciudad Juárez—formerly known as the Paso del Norte, “Pass of the North”—in Chihuahua and its Texas neighbor El Paso, for example, is shockingly wide, the former poor and in recent times plagued by violent drug gangs, while the latter is rich, safe, and full of opportunity and promise. Yet they are separated by a single physical barrier, a thin line on the map: the Rio Grande, a ribbon of muddy brown water, for most of the year shallow enough in places for a human to wade across. Otherwise these two cities’ geographies are identical. They share the same mountain pass and highway, the old Camino Real (Royal Road) through the Sierra de Juárez to the south and east and the Franklin Mountains to the north and west. (In colonial times the Camino Real linked Mexico City and Chihuahua with Santa Fe and Taos.) Here culture, as the economic historian David Landes would have said, has made all the difference.¹¹

Within Western civilization there is a remarkable amount of cultural diversity, a fact that holds true on both sides of the Atlantic. This is also true not only in terms of the respective differences that exist on either side of the Tortilla Curtain, as the Mexican novelist and essayist Carlos Fuentes called it,¹² between largely Catholic Mexico and the Protestant United States (not until the late nineteenth century did the United States start to become religiously and culturally diverse), but also in the dynamic interplay of these two cultures over time. Neither Mexico nor the United States has ever existed in a vacuum, and the same dynamic applies to Canada, although the material differences on each side of the United States’ northern border have been far less stark.

Unity versus Diversity

Much of the scholarship on the history of North America stresses the continent’s divisions. By contrast, this book will emphasize the unity of the continent and its peoples—Homo sapiens all. Mexico, Canada, and the United States have far more than a vast, varied, and resource-rich continent in common. Each nation enjoys an incredibly rich Indigenous history and heritage as well as sharing the alien, if dynamic, European culture that was transplanted, often with great violence and brutality, to North America from Europe, principally from Spain and England but also from France (in Quebec), the Netherlands (in New York), Russia (in Alaska), and Denmark (in Greenland). While the Indigenous heritage of North America is most evident in the far north and far south, Europe’s influence may be found in every corner of the continent. In contrast to that of North America, the
“continent” of Europe is a maddeningly ambiguous geographical expression. Still, the same civilization that unites the history of Europe unites the national histories of Mexico, Canada, and the United States, all of which have traditionally been considered separate and distinct.

An important subtheme in this history of North America is the slavery, concentration, exclusion, segregation, or control of non-European peoples, a crucial factor that impeded or retarded the continent’s social development. In 2020 Indigenous peoples numbered 34 million (25.7 million in Mexico, 6.7 million in the United States, and 1.6 million in Canada), approximately 7 percent of North America’s total population of 493.4 million, while the number of peoples of African descent stood at 45.7 million (42 million in the United States, 2.5 million in Mexico, and 1.2 million in Canada), or 9 percent of the continent’s total. Mexico has the largest Indigenous population, at 25.7 million, while the United States has by far and away the largest African or Black population, at 42 million. (These estimates are based on the latest figures available from Mexico’s Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Statistics Greenland, Statistics Canada, and the US Census Bureau.) Today the African or Black population of Mexico stands at 1.38 million, which is slightly larger than Canada’s African population of nearly 1.2 million. Mexico’s African population is concentrated in the southern states of Veracruz, Guerrero, and Oaxaca, while Canada’s is distributed widely throughout the country.

Given the pervasive dominance of European culture in North America and the similarity of the two continents’ environments, it is hardly an exaggeration to describe the three nations of North America as “Neo-Europes.” The European connection to North America is not only important in explaining the continent’s initial development, beginning with the conquest of Mexico in 1521, but remains a crucial point of reference throughout the entire period under study. In fact, transatlantic ties and reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationships between the two continents have increased in importance over time. In the sixteenth century the West’s core (as defined by wealth, military power, technology, social development, and influence) resided in Iberia, or southwestern Europe. During the eighteenth century the core shifted to northwestern Europe. And by the mid-twentieth century, between the signings of the Atlantic Charter and the North Atlantic Treaty, the core had shifted yet again, this time to eastern North America, where it remains today—for now. (I am indebted to Alfred Crosby for the concept of Neo-Europe, though I use the term in a political and cultural sense and
do not necessarily accept Crosby's environmental scheme; and I have found Ian Morris's idea of "shifting cores" within a civilization to be very useful.\(^\text{13}\)

In short, I contend that the history of North America cannot be told except in relation to Asia, Oceania, Latin America, Africa, and above all North America's sister continent, Europe—a point that becomes immediately obvious when the histories of Mexico, Canada, and the United States are considered together. Yet over the centuries historians, especially those who study the United States, have for the most part treated the histories of North America's individual nations separately, both from one another and, as a group, from that of Europe, all but ignoring the significance of a larger North American history.

The Significance of Social Power

Theories of social development or histories based on nonorganic evolutionary typologies such as savagery, barbarism, and civilization, which classify and rank societies and cultures, date back at least to the Age of Enlightenment, with those postulated by thinkers such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith. In the nineteenth century the idea of cultural evolution or social development was central to the historical and socioeconomic theories of scholars as different as Karl Marx, who stressed the role of class struggle and oppression in world history; Herbert Spencer, for whom social evolution was the story of increasing complexity and differentiation of function; and Frederick Jackson Turner, who emphasized the significance of an expanding frontier, and the opportunity that expansion offered, in shaping America's development.\(^\text{14}\) The Gini coefficient, developed before World War I by Corrado Gini, an Italian statistician interested in the demographic evolution of nations, could test the ideas of a Marx or a Turner to determine whether a society was advancing toward, or sliding away from, equality by measuring the dispersion of wealth in a society. One could also use it to evaluate the efficacy of national policies and programs.

Later, social development would prove to be central to the great ideological, political, and military struggles of the latter half of the twentieth century. In the West, modernizationists like C. P. Snow in Britain or Walt Rostow in the United States argued that the key to social progress or development for underdeveloped "Third World" countries was adherence to free markets, democratic practice, the rule of law, individual liberties, respect for property, and the sanctity of contracts.\(^\text{15}\) Marxists in the East, on the other hand, and not a few in the West, believed that socioeconomic advancement
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could be best achieved by supporting dictatorships of the proletariat and creating command (state-controlled) economies. Through central planning, five-year plans, and great leaps forward, Communist governments sought to accelerate their countries’ social development, in the process catching up with and eventually surpassing—or “burying,” as Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev put it in the midst of the Cold War—the West.

Since that time the idea of social development has thrived. In 1990, one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event that marked the liberation of Eastern Europe, and one year before the implosion of the Soviet Union and the start of decommunization in Russia, the United Nations adopted the Human Development Index (HDI), the work of Mahbub ul Haq, a Pakistani international development theorist. Every year since then, the UN has graded nations on the basis of three traits: longevity, per capita income, and education, calling to mind Benjamin Franklin’s celebrated admonition to be “healthy, wealthy, and wise.” HDI scores are based on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 being the highest. According to the UN Human Development Report for 2020, Norway, with a score of 0.957, tops the list. At the very bottom, entry 189, is Niger, with a score of 0.394. The economic historian Leandro Prados de la Escosura, incidentally, has extended Haq’s index as far back as 1870.

In 1934 Simon Kuznets, a Russian immigrant to the United States, formulated a way to measure a nation’s gross domestic product (GDP), creating an index widely adopted after the 1944 meeting of the UN Monetary and Financial Conference, better known as the Bretton Woods Conference. In contrast to the HDI, GDP measures not whether a society is getting healthier, wealthier, and wiser but rather its total output of goods and services, and, notably, the rate of economic activity, although GDP per capita remains an important measure of a country’s standard of living.

GDP provides a lot of useful information. And no comparative history would be complete without reference to Angus Maddison’s historical statistics, in which GDP per capita is measured across time and space, going all the way back to the birth of Christ. The problem is that such comparisons can be very misleading. A country may export a great deal of silver, as did colonial Mexico, and as a result have a high GDP, but if the benefits of those sales are not shared widely among the populace of the producing country, it can still be a desperately poor one. Indeed, as Kuznets brilliantly hypothesized, in poor countries increased economic activity increases inequality, whereas in developed countries increased economic activity decreases inequality. Kuznets graphed his hypothesis, which creates an arc...
(the $y$ axis measures inequality; the $x$ axis measures income per capita). The HDI provides a corrective to GDP because it measures a country’s well-being or happiness (quality of life and degree of contentedness) relative to that of other countries, rather than merely its overall economic output and activity. The HDI, we might say is more Jeffersonian in its attempt to attach real metrics to the otherwise subjective pursuit of happiness. GDP, on the other hand, as a measure of raw economic power, is purely Hamiltonian. Although the HDI is newer than GDP, its philosophical basis is ancient, dating back to Aristotle, who believed that well-being or happiness should be measured by what a man does rather than by what he owns.17

For the historian, all three of these indexes—Gini, GDP, and HDI—pose problems. This is because these snapshots in time do not tell us very much about the why: Why are some countries more developed than others? Why are some countries rich and some poor? Why are some countries democratic or free and others totalitarian? And why are some countries able to influence or even dominate other countries? It is also notoriously difficult to make cross-country comparisons, even in this day and age, and even though GDP and the HDI were designed precisely with this specific problem in mind. How much more difficult to try to project these measurements backward in time, especially back five centuries! And yet by endeavoring to combine social science with history, we can try to bridge the divide that C. P. Snow argued existed between the sciences and the humanities.

Ian Morris is an example of a scholar who has succeeded in crossing Snow’s cultural divide. An archaeologist from Stanford University who has built on the work of many others, including Earl Cook, Raoul Naroll, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Leslie White, Morris attempts to answer the timely question suggested by the title of his book Why the West Rules—For Now.18 His social development (SD) index measures four traits—energy capture, social organization (city size), information technology, and war-making capacity. For Morris, energy capture is based on the average number of kilocalories of food/nonfood energy consumed by humans in any given period. The size of cities serves as a rough proxy for a society’s organizational complexity. Information technology, or the ability to store and share information, is divided into the level and rate of literacy and numeracy as well as the speed and reach of communication. And finally, a society’s capacity to project power, or to defend itself from belligerents, is based on the size, firepower, efficiency, and reach of its armed forces. In short, it takes a lot more SD to build a skyscraper than it does a log cabin.19
Covering a period that stretches back to the Ice Age, Morris uses his simple but, as he insists, not **too** simple index to assign points for each trait. He then adds up the scores to compare the respective social development of the East (the core of which lay in eastern China) and the West (the core of which has shifted back and forth between the eastern Mediterranean and western Europe), starting ten thousand years ago. Morris concludes that while the West has been in the lead for much of that time, it has no locked-in advantage. Like Jared Diamond, Morris favors geographical (“location, location, location”) over cultural explanations.

Between the fall of Rome and the rise of the modern West, medieval Europe (AD 500–1500) fell well behind the high point reached by the Roman Empire at its zenith, as well as behind China during the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279), when China’s social development easily matched that of Rome. But by the eighteenth century, with the start of the fossil fuel revolution, Europe caught up with and finally surpassed Rome at its height; by the nineteenth century it had surpassed the rest of the world. And while the West may rule now, as it has since some point in the nineteenth century, there are indications that in perhaps as little as a century the East will again overtake it, if for no other reason than the growing size and number of its cities. Of course climate change may quash this business of making predictions. Morris uses the term **social development**, but a far more apt term, I would argue, is **social power**, since he is measuring not just a society’s ability to get things done but also, critically, its ability to influence other societies—a point of keen interest in the history of North America.

The advantage of using Morris’s index, in conjunction with other indexes, traits, and observations, to measure relative success is that it helps explain why, for instance, Norway, which ranks consistently at the top of HDI reports—ahead of the United States as well as China and Russia—is not otherwise considered a world power, or even a regional one. Certainly the policies of Norway’s government in particular, and Norway’s culture in general, are key factors in its high social development. But while Norway’s social development is higher than that of the United States, Norway’s social power is much lower. In fact the Scandinavian country’s high social development is due in no small part to the fact that it enjoys the very real security that the United States and its military allies, which include Norway, provide the entire North Atlantic region. (Norway is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, founded in 1949; the US military dwarfs the other militaries in the alliance in terms of its
size, firepower, reach, and efficiency.) In other words, the story of social
development is incomplete without context—that is, without considering
that story in regard to social power, as Morris’s history makes abundantly
clear. This is true of each of the world’s regions: Europe, Asia, Africa, and
the Americas. It is especially true of North America, where the West’s core
and leadership ultimately shifted from western Europe to eastern North
America during the mid-twentieth century. In short, the argument I make
here is that a society’s well-being is related either to its own social power
or to the social power of other societies. This insight is fundamental to the
explanation of North American history and why the United States came
first to dominate the continent and later the world. One effect of Morris’s
index is the enormous magnification of the importance of the nineteenth
and especially twentieth centuries, which loom very large. Indeed, the last
two centuries could be likened to the Himalayas, while all the rest of hu-
man history is nothing more than the Indo-Gangetic Plain below, almost
flat and featureless.

In these pages, the term social development generally refers to what oc-
curs within a society, while social power is used to define the relationship
that exists between societies—and clearly a society’s social development will
have a bearing on the level of its social power. A society’s social power
may either facilitate or hinder the social development of other societies.
Or, because of its lack thereof, a society may find itself on the wrong end of
another society’s stick, or within another society’s “sphere of interest.” The
narrative arc of this book is framed with this very consideration in mind. It
begins with the European conquest of North America—that is, the Spanish
conquest of the Aztecs in 1521, the point at which North America began to
fall within Europe’s growing sphere of interest or spread of empire. And it
ends with the Monroe Doctrine, North America’s declaration of defiance
against Europe, when the United States not only formally asserted its inde-
pendence from Europe’s sphere of influence but also proclaimed its own,
namely that of the Western Hemisphere.

Central to any history of North America is how the United States, for-
merly a small collection of British colonies confined to a narrow strip of
the Atlantic coast almost until the end of the eighteenth century, emerged
to become a continent-girdling federation, the world’s sole superpower, and
leader of the free world by the 1990s. Indeed, the United States was the ma-
jor driver of change on the continent as well as in the rest of the world. And
if we want to know why the United States rules North America, at least for
now, then the utility of Morris’s index—his measurement of social power over time—is at once apparent.

But charting the growth of social power can do much more than inform yet another narrative about America’s meteoric rise from colony to regional hegemon, and ultimately superpower. It can also be used to integrate, as this book tries to demonstrate, the various histories of the entire continent, whether these histories are of high social development or low, into a single narrative. To put it another way, Native, Mexican, American, and Canadian histories did not develop in isolation; they have developed together, if unevenly, within a continental as well as transatlantic context. The purpose of this book, then, is to explain the significance of the disparities or asymmetries in levels of social development, which have changed over time, between western Europe and Native North America, and later between Anglo and Hispanic North America. The use of traits, whether those of Haq or Morris, allows scholars of global history to compare apples to apples rather than apples to oranges. And to avoid confusion, depending on the context, the terms Mexico, pre-federal and federal United States, and Canada are not historical entities or regions. They are standardized national accounts that allow for comparison and analysis and refer to the territories that either become or are the nations of Mexico, Canada, and the United States.

Using social and comparative development and other evolutionary approaches to interpret history was once commonplace. In fact Turner, who invented the professional study of American history in 1893 by using the frontier to distinguish European from United States history, was very much a disciple of Darwin. As Turner grandly stated:

The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution. It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system.22

But by 1943, fifty years later and in the midst of World War II and all the ugly nationalism and racism associated with it, Margaret Mead, who had
written the classic study *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), fleshed out the Boasian creed in “The Role of Small South Sea Cultures in the Post War World,” an article that appeared in *American Anthropologist*. Franz Boas, her mentor, had been a major proponent of cultural relativism and opponent of cultural evolutionism. “As anthropologists,” Mead wrote,

our contribution has been a recognition of the co-equal value of human cultures seen as wholes. . . . We have stood out against any grading of cultures in hierarchical systems which would place our own culture at the top and placed the other cultures of the world in a descending scale according to the extent that they differ from ours. Refusing to admit that one culture could be said to be better than another. . . . we have stood out for a sort of democracy of cultures, a concept which would naturally take its place beside the other great democratic beliefs in the equal potentiality of all races of men, and in the inherent dignity and right to opportunity of each human being.23

And in 1946, in her study of Japan, Ruth Benedict, also a Boas student, declared that the goal of anthropology was “to make the world safe for human differences.” In 1952 Alfred L. Kroeber (yet another Boas student) and Clyde Kluckhohn further disentangled the concept of culture and its study from race by clearly and very usefully delineating culture as a “set of attributes and products of society, and therewith of mankind, which are extra-somatic and transmissible by mechanisms other than biological heredity.” Since these statements were made, the Boasian creed has gone on to be widely accepted by the disciplines of anthropology and history.24 These views are certainly shared here. But while it is true that “all men are created” equal, to quote a signal proposition of the Enlightenment, they are not necessarily born into equal societies, as the United Nations’ HDI index makes abundantly clear, year after year. Moreover, these differences are some of the major drivers of history. They clearly drove, as we shall see, the history of North America.

The terms *Mexican, American, Canadian,* and *Native,* I should add here, are abstractions or composites that refer to collections of different and very diverse peoples from Europe, Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere. The formation of national identity in North America was a slow and complex process, one that occurred at different times, in different places, among different groups, and even among different subgroups inside other groups. To complicate the matter further, national self-identification of one group
was not necessarily accepted by the others. For European Americans in the United States, for instance, who largely came to accept each other as “White,” despite their centuries-old rivalries, enmities, and fratricidal conflicts in the Old World, their skin color served as at least one common denominator, and became the basis for the invention of a new people. This newfound national identity, however, was slow to be extended to non-European peoples. Indeed, these European Americans were notoriously reluctant to accept African or Black Americans as fellow citizens and countrymen.

But the more enlightened—for instance, the French American author J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur who condemned American slavery—thought the new nation was based less on ethnic, cultural, or racial backgrounds than on conditions of equality. As he put it, America society was not “composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything, and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida.”

On the other hand, similar-looking English-speaking and French-speaking European Canadians may have coexisted within a single state, but they nevertheless lived in separate linguistic “solitudes.” And having segregated African or Black Americans, whether well-established or newcomers, White Americans on the same principle went on to discriminate against Chinese laborers who made their way to the United States, and in 1882 they legally barred Chinese from the United States altogether. Canada would follow suit in 1923. European Americans also discriminated against Mexican Americans on the basis, in part, of skin color. In contrast Mormons, who were overwhelmingly drawn from European American stock, to use an old-fashioned term, regarded themselves as a chosen people. And they long remained cautious toward, and slow to identify with, their fellow European Americans and former persecutors. The formation of national identities and dual or even poly identities among the continent’s Native peoples adds yet another layer of interest and complexity, especially in Mexico, which imagined a new cultural identity, la raza cósmica, “the cosmic race,” a mixture of Indigenous and Iberian elements.

The history of national identity in Europe was of course also layered, and if anything even more complicated, as Brexit Britain and the persistence of
Scottish and Catalonian independence movements remind everyone today. But there exists one big difference between Europe and North America. Europeans managed to form a relatively clear continental identity, which finally was given formal economic and political expression by the founding of the European Union in 1992. On February 6, 2018, as reported in the Wall Street Journal, the European Union announced its plans to expand its borders to include the Western Balkans. Federica Mogherini, the EU’s foreign policy chief, explained the criteria for EU membership: this region, although relatively poor, shares “the same history as the members of the European Union, the same cultural heritage, the same challenges.”

However, as British prime minister Boris Johnson declared on October 17, 2019, while Britain was leaving the European Union, it was not leaving Europe, for Britain was a “quintessentially European country.” North Americans, on the other hand, have failed to produce even a rudimentary North American identity. We speak of Europeans, but not of North Americans. In fact, in Mexico the term norteamericano is used to distinguish non-Spanish-speaking Americans and Canadians from Spanish-speaking Mexicans or, more generally, Latin Americans. More recently, when US president Donald Trump renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement, he excised the words “North American” altogether from the new agreement’s title, dubbing it the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA). In 1974 Gary Snyder, the poet laureate of deep ecology, did suggest calling North America by an all-embracing term, Turtle Island. This exception only proved the rule, and nothing came of it. In short, North America may not possess a shared identity or sense of itself, but as we shall see, the continent very much has a shared history.