

**FROM:** Ted Aronson  
**DATE:** March 12, 2025  
**RE:** **Among the WEIRDest . . .**

Here is the opening to Larry's latest:

*Why are some societies Western, Educated, Individualistic,<sup>1</sup> Rich, and Democratic ("WEIRD") while others are the opposite? Why are some nations rich and others poor?*

*Why are some societies expansive, placing trust in strangers, building lasting institutions that rely on impersonal relationships, and fostering invention and creativity — while others, more inward-facing, preserve costly and unproductive old ways and favor family members over everyone else?*

*According to Joseph Henrich, an anthropologist who wrote an immensely influential book on the topic, the answer to these questions is very strange. It goes back to a decision by the Western (now called Roman Catholic) Church in the fourth century A.D. to prohibit cousin marriages. In a startling example of the butterfly effect, this decision, according to Henrich, caused the world to split into WEIRD and traditional cultures. Descended from those who weren't allowed to marry even distant cousins so they had to search far afield for mates, the WEIRD (so the theory goes) created Western civilization.*



Joseph Henrich

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## IT'S GOOD TO BE WEIRD: JOSEPH HENRICH'S WEIRDEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD FIVE YEARS ON

Laurence B. Siegel  
March 2025

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Joseph Henrich  
[Source](#)

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Following this logic, the WEIRD are credited with humanity's greatest material accomplishment — the economic revolution that, more than a millennium after the butterfly flapped its wings, catapulted standards of living from just above subsistence to mass affluence. In

contrast, those trapped in traditional cultures suffered from stark poverty until, fairly recently, they began to catch up as Western attitudes spread across the world.

If ever there was a radical, single-variable theory of human behavior, this is it and it's a doozy!

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<sup>1</sup> Not a typo. The “I” word in Henrich's book is *industrialized*. I explain why I changed it later in this article.

Here's the cherry on top: "Your brain has been modified," writes Henrich. He presents evidence that Western culture, largely through the mechanism of reading, has changed our brains physically, in highly specific ways including:

thicken[ing] your corpus callosum, which is the information highway that connects the left and right hemispheres of your brain, and alter[ing] the part of your prefrontal cortex that is involved in language production (Broca's area).

Do I believe the theory? It seems so farfetched as to stretch credulity. Moreover, I don't like one-variable explanations for very large outcomes; the human story is just too complicated for that. Considering that the rise of Western civilization is probably the biggest news story of all time, it demands an explanation more thorough, and a mechanism more direct, than just the early Christian prohibition of cousin marriage! But Henrich builds a powerful case for his hypothesis, one that we should not ignore.

### WHAT THIS BOOK REVIEW IS ABOUT

In the five years since Henrich published his book, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*, experts and amateurs have opined on this question at length. I'll summarize some of these responses. Uncovering "the secret of our success" — the title of an [earlier Henrich book](#) — is not just of academic interest; it is critically important to our attempts at making poor countries rich, developing the developing world.

Readers already familiar with Henrich's work will notice that, for the letter I in WEIRD, I've substituted *individualistic* for *industrialized*. *Industrialized* is repetitive, because *rich* is also in the acronym and the two go together; meanwhile, individualism — perhaps more than any other characteristic — captures the unique Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, modernist culture that, if you're reading this, you probably belong to.

### HOW TO READ THE WEIRDEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

Whether Henrich's hypothesis is correct is a different question than whether *The WEIRDest People in the World* is a good read. If you're an avid reader, it is; otherwise, it's not. The book is way too long and contains a *lot* of detail about Henrich's anthropological investigations that isn't needed for readers to grasp the conclusions. For those reasons I recommend starting by reading the last part of the book, Part IV, entitled Birthing the Modern World, and then going back and searching through the other parts for topics you find interesting.

Let's first summarize Henrich's major themes and then review some of the commentary that it has inspired in the five years since *WEIRD* was published.

## HOW DID PROHIBITING COUSIN MARRIAGE CHANGE THE COURSE OF CIVILIZATION?

Of all the possible explanations for the takeoff into modernity that occurred between 1500 and 1800 in Europe and its offshoots, a church “marriage and family program” (MFP) from a millennium earlier is the least intuitive. What about scientific knowledge, voyages of discovery, the printing press, coal, the steam engine, banking, joint-stock corporations, and all the other explanations favored by economic historians? More specifically, how did a prohibition on cousin marriage affect society so profoundly?

It didn't, at least not directly. As Henrich acknowledges, the cousin-marriage ban was just a catalyst for producing the WEIRDness of today's Western world. What did operate directly on social attitudes and practices was the resulting need to find a mate outside one's extended family and village. (In an early medieval village, most of the inhabitants are related, part of a clan.) This forced extraversion gradually broke down kin-based institutions. A culture of individualism, self-enhancement, and profit-seeking arose in its place and evolved into what we now call Western civilization.

## KINSHIP, WEIRDNESS, AND INNOVATION

The traditional system of “intensive kinship” places loyalty to blood relatives above all other values. This arrangement must have some advantages or it would not have survived for countless generations — and cousin marriage is really the only way to keep clans (large kinship-based communities) together over long periods.

However, intensive kinship is not conducive to innovation. Quite the opposite: the traditional man or woman thinks, “if my ancestors' ways of doing things were good enough for them, they're good enough for me.” And we know from economic theory that innovation is the key to sustained economic advancement.<sup>2</sup>

WEIRD societies turn intensive-kinship practices on their ear: “I respect my ancestors but I want to be different from them and do better in life.” Businesses, instead of hiring family members, seek out the most skilled or productive workers even if they're from far away or originate in families with whom one has no prior connection. Newly married couples are encouraged to start new households separate from those of their parents. It is acceptable, even praiseworthy, for someone to move to another city to learn new skills and possibly start a business or pursue a profession there. All these behaviors, necessary for large-scale innovation, seem perfectly natural to us but are very WEIRD by world-historical standards.

The great political scientist [Francis Fukuyama](#) summed up this dichotomy by saying that, while Westerners think it corrupt to hire family members preferentially, someone with traditional kinship-based values would regard *not* hiring them as corrupt.<sup>3</sup> A quarter-century before

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<sup>2</sup> The relationship between innovation and economic growth is well-established and needs no reference, but a particularly good exposition of it is in McCloskey, Deirdre N., and Art Carden. 2020. *Leave Me Alone and I'll Make You Rich*. I reviewed that book [here](#) and [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. 1995. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*.

Henrich thought up the WEIRD designation, Fukuyama drew a distinction between high-trust and low-trust societies, paralleling WEIRD and non-WEIRD quite closely. If you can only trust your relatives, and the degree of trust is proportional to the closeness of the blood relation, you're non-WEIRD, and typical of most of the people who have ever lived. If you trust people you've never met who share your interests and knowledge base, perhaps because you've interacted with them in online scientific conferences, that's pretty WEIRD.

Admittedly, this set of views sounds like an argument that Western values are "better." Henrich avoids making that claim, but if you're only interested in economic success, adopting WEIRD attitudes helps a lot. China might be an exception, but China did not escape extreme poverty until it imitated Western capitalism in many (but not all) of its aspects.

### WHAT WAS THE CHURCH THINKING?

But did early medieval Catholic church leaders really want to reshape society into what we now think of as modernism? Of course not. They were acting in their own interest.

"Forced to find Christian partners," Judith Shulevitz writes in *The Atlantic* in a review of Henrich's book, "Christians left their communities." She continues,

Christianity's insistence on monogamy broke extended households into nuclear families. The Church uprooted horizontal, relational identity, replacing it with a vertical identity oriented toward the institution itself... Formerly, property almost always went to family members. The idea now took hold that it could go elsewhere... [T]he Church urged the wealthy to ensure their place in heaven by bequeathing their money to the poor—that is, to the Church, benefactor to the needy.<sup>4</sup>

If one accepts Henrich's logic, we are enjoying, many centuries later, the unintended consequences of this self-serving, and long-forgotten, church policy.

### WEIRDNESS AND RELIGION

It's impossible to discuss all the facets of Henrich's wide-ranging thesis in this brief review, so I'll touch on a few key aspects: religion, psychology, and economics. Many readers absorbed Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) early in their education; Henrich's book has been called a rewriting of it, enhanced by anthropological and psychological evidence accumulated since Weber's time.

To Weber's appreciation of Protestantism, the historian Thomas Cahill added *The Gifts of the Jews*, one of which was the notion, illustrated by their exodus from Egypt, that they could choose their future rather than suffering the repetition of what has always come before. (A belief in at least some degree of free will is necessary for modern life.) Finally, Enlightenment

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/10/joseph-henrich-weird-people/615496/>

philosophy, rooted in the primacy of the individual, rounds out the recipe for modernity that we typically learn in philosophy or history class.

Henrich says that this understanding is partly wrong. He locates the origin of Western individualism, capitalism, and freedom in early medieval Catholic church practices, which we often regard as opposite to, not congruent with, the Jewish, Protestant, and Enlightenment values that I outlined above. Thus, Henrich's argument, while building on Weber and Fukuyama, really is new and different.<sup>5</sup> I turn, later in this essay, to the question of whether it is correct.

## WEIRDNESS AND PSYCHOLOGY

Henrich's reach spans not just anthropology, history, and economics, but psychology, which receives an extensive treatment (too detailed for my taste) in the book. The WEIRD and non-WEIRD, he writes, think differently about the most basic personal questions, such as whether you should lie in court to get a friend out of trouble. The WEIRD say no; a more traditional ethic says you should.

Such differences of belief naturally lead to different behavior and, in the long run, a different social structure. (If "your brain has been modified" physically, this outcome should not be a surprise.) Moreover, according to Henrich, the WEIRD mentality isn't "normal" — the traditional mentality is, and the WEIRD one is an aberration, just like lasting prosperity in the Western world is an aberration.

## WEIRDNESS AND THE ECONOMY

How did the "rich" part work its way into the WEIRD complex of characteristics? To get rich, a society must accept at least three premises: (1) it is possible to get rich; (2) it is morally acceptable for some people to be richer than others; and (3) it is virtuous to work hard, learn new skills from others, innovate, and capitalize on one's abilities and luck. The WEIRD mentality embraces all of these propositions. The non-WEIRD tends to reject them.

You may bristle at "it is possible to get rich." How can it not be possible, given that every society has had kings, merchants, landowners, and usually slaveholders? The answer is that, in traditional societies, such differences in fortune were typically attributed to the gods, or to a caste system that determined everyone's place regardless of their efforts, or to luck. Exceptional individual effort was frowned on or regarded as fruitless.

Remember that Deng Xiaoping had to remind the suffering Chinese people of 1978 that "it is glorious to get rich," having been told for two generations that it was not just inglorious but

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<sup>5</sup> Despite this apparent contradiction, Henrich winds up calling Protestantism "the WEIRDest religion," noting that "countries with Protestant majorities show even higher individualism..., greater impersonal trust..., and a stronger emphasis on creativity compared to majority Catholic countries" (p. 418). Still, there's one even WEIRDer religion, at least in its modern manifestation: if you had to choose a country that best fits Henrich's full set of descriptors — (once more with feeling) Western, educated, individualistic, rich, and democratic — wouldn't that be Israel?

possibly lethal.<sup>6</sup> So, liberated by a modest but desperately needed infusion of economic freedom, that's what they did.

## CRITIQUES OF HENRICH

The popularity of Henrich's thesis, along with its farfetched nature, has prompted responses from a great many anthropologists, historians, and economists. Here I summarize a few of the most notable.

### CHARLES FREEMAN: HENRICH GETS BOTH ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN HISTORY WRONG

Charles Freeman, a British historian and author of *The Closing of the Western Mind*, a book about late antiquity and early Christianity, says that Henrich is just plain wrong:<sup>7</sup> "Oded Galor's *The Journey of Humanity* destroys the central thesis of Henrich's book." Freeman notes that the Western Roman Empire, which came to a close at about the time that Henrich's story begins in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., had many WEIRD features. "Roman law, which protected individual rights," Freeman writes, "was a major achievement. Individual farmers, smallholders, [and] villa owners underpinned property rights. The collapse of the Western empire in the fifth century was total and similar levels of prosperity may not have been reached in Europe before 1500, some say 1800."

In addition, "The Romans...banned cousin marriages to the fourth degree of consanguinity and held land in individual plots, making nonsense of [Henrich's] claim that in 400 A.D. 'Europe was just like everywhere else in the world' with intensive kinship and communal landholding." Moreover, up to about 1750, Freeman writes, most Europeans lived in misery — they were not rich or free. Freeman concludes that Henrich makes two major errors of historical scholarship, underestimating earlier social advances made by the Romans and then overestimating the WEIRDness of Europe between the fall of Rome and the Enlightenment more than a millennium later.

### RAZIB KHAN: IN AN AMBITIOUS INTELLECTUAL EFFORT, ERRORS WILL SLIP IN

Razib Khan, a Bangladeshi-American geneticist and popularizer of genetic and genomic science, has a kinder view. He agrees with Henrich that "the obliteration of the Western European extended kinship system by the Church between 600 and 1000 A.D. seems to have been...total."<sup>8</sup> That is a point very much in Henrich's favor. According to Khan, the Church's marriage and family program worked — perhaps not to the point of making medieval

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<sup>6</sup> Or 1992, depending on which account you read. If he didn't say it in 1978, he certainly acted as though he believed it.

<sup>7</sup> In a review of Henrich's book on Amazon: [https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R28QL9PWWETS6/ref=cm\\_cr\\_arp\\_d\\_rvw\\_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B07RZFCPMD](https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R28QL9PWWETS6/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B07RZFCPMD)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gnXP.com/WordPress/2020/07/04/the-dark-age-roots-of-western-modernity/> and <https://www.gnXP.com/WordPress/2020/10/24/against-the-weird/>.



Europeans into moderns (which Henrich doesn't really say), but enough that the results are visible to us a millennium later.

Balancing his praise with criticism, Khan adds, "Nevertheless, what Freeman alludes to is not a small error. It's a deep philosophical chasm." Khan concludes, "There needs to be more exploration of the details of Henrich's conjectures, though I think Freeman is too hard on him." When a researcher's work is "broad, interdisciplinary, and... 'breaks things', Khan writes, "errors will slip in."

### HILTON ROOT: THE STORY IS TOO SIMPLE

In a book review published by the Economic History Association, the George Mason University professor Hilton Root writes,

The main shortcoming of Henrich's analysis is its reliance on linear causality. Tracing an outcome, e.g., the distinctive psychology of Western society, to an original cause, the Church ban on cousins wedding, is in itself WEIRD. And his perspective is written for other WEIRD-minded folk who interpret causal pathways in history as proceeding in a straight line.<sup>9</sup>

I agree. Henrich's story is too simple, too cute, too much in keeping with popular history's tendency to make an author's pet theory explain everything. This complaint should not stop you from reading the book, but it's a serious one.

### DANIEL DENNETT: OTHER ISSUES ASIDE, THE WEIRD/NON-WEIRD PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTINCTION IS CORRECT

Daniel Dennett, the late celebrated philosopher and cognitive scientist, deserves and gets the last word (of this section on critiques).<sup>10</sup> "[W]e must stop assuming that *our* ways are 'universal'," he writes; we Westerners, analyzing historical information or studying other cultures, should acknowledge that we're the ones who are weird. That insight is Henrich's biggest contribution, even if his cause-and-effect story about cousin marriage and Western civilization is oversimplified.

### ADVICE FOR INVESTORS: DON'T GET MAD — GET EVEN

I once believed, and still tend to believe, that all countries will tend toward WEIRDness over time, purely out of economic self-interest. Without asserting that Western culture is the "best," I'm confident in saying that — at least so far — it has been the most profitable. As a result, I've invested, through emerging- and frontier-market funds, in countries that seem to be Westernizing.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://eh.net/book\\_reviews/the-weirdest-people-in-the-world-how-the-west-became-psychologically-peculiar-and-particularly-prosperous/](https://eh.net/book_reviews/the-weirdest-people-in-the-world-how-the-west-became-psychologically-peculiar-and-particularly-prosperous/)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/12/books/review/the-weirdest-people-in-the-world-joseph-henrich.html>



Except for the brief but explosive 2003-2007 emerging-markets boom, the results in this century have been pathetic. The largest U.S. stocks have beaten all rivals and by huge margins. So, don't take my investment advice! Maybe you should find out what I'm doing and do the opposite.

Is there hope for my little-acorns-to-mighty-oaks strategy? The economist Charles Kindleberger joked that "there is nothing so disturbing to one's well-being and judgment as to see a friend get rich."<sup>11</sup> This applies to countries as well as individuals. Watching your neighbor get rich can motivate you to either get mad or get even. A country can try to get even with its successful neighbors by imitating, as best it can, the neighbor's practices and policies. Wouldn't you think that North Korea, Palestine, and Venezuela would have figured that out by now? (Venezuela abuts Brazil and Colombia, which are not quite rich but are doing fine by regional standards.) Nope — they got mad instead. Sometimes irrationality wins.

But it's a much better idea to try to get even. Many of the countries in South and Southeast Asia are enjoying extraordinary growth. Are they becoming culturally WEIRD or are they using some other method to get ahead? I'm not qualified to say. Unfortunately, aside from India where the stock market has done well, investment returns in these countries have lagged far behind macroeconomic indicators. That's a buying opportunity if you're a risk-taker.

We've also seen pockets of exceptional growth in central Asia, parts of the Middle East, and parts (but not nearly enough) of Africa. [Magatte Wade](#), a Senegalese economist living in the U.S., asserts that sub-Saharanans need adopt the free-market principles which, when mixed with competent government, made the West rich; people respond to incentives, and Africans, as capable as anyone else, just need the right ones. But, she adds, it's not enough just to focus on "macroeconomic policies (things like inflation and trade)"; Africans need "the 'entrepreneur's toolkit' — property rights, rule of law, and the freedom to start and run businesses easily."<sup>12</sup>

Wade's recipe has succeeded in the original Western world, the Asian Tigers, and selected locales such as Poland, Chile, and Israel. It is producing results in the "tiger cubs" of Southeast Asia. Africans need it more than anyone else. The more countries that adopt this mentality and its accompanying institutions, the better the acorns-to-oaks portfolio will perform.

## CONCLUSION

WEIRDness provides rewards — wealth, the pursuit of happiness, political freedom — that should cause it to succeed, over the long run, in the Darwinian competition between social systems that we call "history." I hope it wins. WEIRD is good.

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<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Forsyth, Randall W. 2021. "Is Stagflation Coming Back? Economist Sees Parallels With the 1970s—and Big Differences." *Barron's* (October 22), <https://www.barrons.com/articles/stagflation-1970s-economy-51634916550>.

<sup>12</sup> Wade, Magatte. 2025. "The African Economic Miracle That Almost Was." *Africa's Bright Future* (blog, February 26), <https://magatte.substack.com/p/the-african-economic-miracle-that>



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