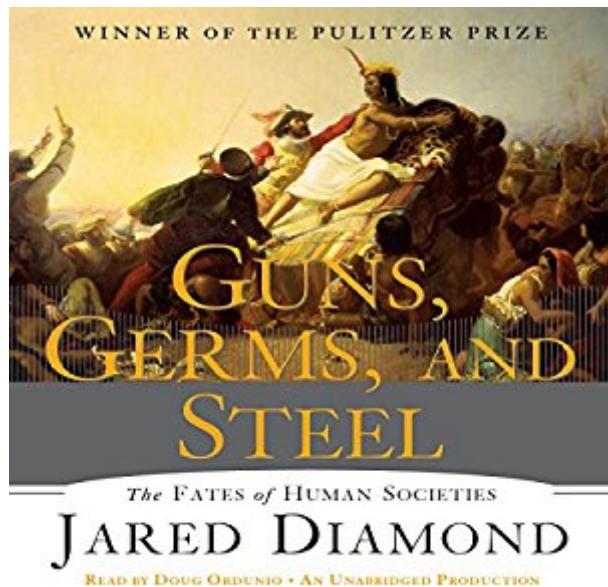


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Guns, Germs And Steel: The Fate Of Human Societies



Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize, General Nonfiction, 1998 Guns, Germs and Steel examines the rise of civilization and the issues its development has raised throughout history. Having done field work in New Guinea for more than 30 years, Jared Diamond presents the geographical and ecological factors that have shaped the modern world. From the viewpoint of an evolutionary biologist, he highlights the broadest movements both literal and conceptual on every continent since the Ice Age, and examines societal advances such as writing, religion, government, and technology. Diamond also dissects racial theories of global history, and the resulting work-Guns, Germs and Steel-is a major contribution to our understanding the evolution of human societies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I think some of the reviewers here didn't read the book closely enough to understand the context of some of Diamond's arguments. He never says that biogeographical effects are the ONLY causes of history. His main purpose is the search for the ultimate, extremely general causes for the broadest of trends in human history and prehistory. By the time the Mongols roared across Asia, or the Moguls invaded India, many cultures around the world already changed so much that bioregional factors, though seminal in the creation of these broadest trends, weren't nearly as important as the political, religious and economic ones. He is not ignoring religion and so on but, he states plainly several times that isn't his focus. He is looking for ultimate causes--before humans had extremely advanced mental concepts like religion. He also wanted to point out the devastating influence of

disease on history. It was surely the European germs that did most of the conquering of Native Americans. The guns and horses were almost incidental. Later on, once Europeans had established themselves, then we can focus on economic and political systems. But we can't ignore the effects of the diseases unleashed on the Americas. These plagues gave the Europeans a very lucky boost that catapulted them beyond the wealth and power of China, India or the Middle East--long before the Industrial Revolution made this gap obvious. Another thing that some people seem to be having trouble with is his assertions about the native intelligence of tribal peoples around the world. (If you read the book, you notice that he is not just saying this about the New Guineans.) He takes pains to point out what he means by this. He is not talking about some mysterious genetic superiority of tribal peoples.

In one compelling volume, the famous biologist Jared Diamond tackles the most important question of global history: Why did Europeans come to dominate the New World? This question has been answered by others before; Diamond's idea that Europe's geography is the cause ("geographical determinism") has also been proposed before. Any student of history can drag up a case or two of this thesis. Baron Montaigne, for example, proposed that Europe's primacy stemmed from its superior government, which could be derived directly from the coolness of its climate. The deep significance of this book is that Diamond's thesis is not simply idle speculation. He proves that the Eurasian land mass had by far the best biological resources with which to develop agricultural societies, and was thus more able to form large, coherent, and powerful social entities. To support this idea, Diamond introduces a thorough set of well-researched data on what kinds of plants and animals are necessary to support a farming society. He investigates the biological resources available to potential farmers in all parts of the world. The people of Eurasia had access to a suite of plants and animals that provided for their needs. Potential farmers in other parts of the world didn't--and so their fertile soil went untilled. After establishing this strong foundation, Diamond falls into repeating ideas about the formation of large-scale societies. These ideas, while unoriginal, are still compelling, and Diamond presents them in a very clear and well-written way. His other major original contribution comes when he discusses the diseases that helped the Old World conquer the New.

According to Diamond, four factors are responsible for all historical developments: 1) availability of potential crops and domestic animals, 2) the orientation of continental axis to facilitate the spread of agriculture, 3) transfer of knowledge between continents, and 4) population size. Diamond states that "those four sets of factors constitute big environmental differences that can be quantified

objectively and that are not subject to dispute." Fair enough, but what **is** subject to dispute is that there might be some other factors at work. Thomas Sowell in *Race and Culture* does a good job of developing the thesis that the exchange of information among European cultures, facilitated by Europe's plentiful navigable rivers, was the key to Europe's technological and economic rise. David Landes in *the Wealth and Poverty of Nations* attributes China's conscious decision in the 1400's to isolate itself from other nations as the key event (decision) that caused it to lose its technological advantage and fall behind Europe. (Diamond briefly touches on 15th Century China in the final chapter, but manages to boil this as well down to an accident of geography.) This is unfortunate, because the book contains a wealth of excellent material which is excellently explained. Many of the core causes which Diamond explores ring very true, and his points are persuasively argued. The connection between the development of agriculture and the subsequent unequal rise of military capability worldwide is very convincing. But convincing though they may be, reading these theories one can't shake the sneaking suspicion that Diamond is selectively presenting evidence which he's found to support his previously drawn conclusion, and neglecting evidence which runs counter.

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