

Guns, germs and steel: the fate of human societies

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Book review

Numerous literary works document the racial struggle designed to assert white inborn supremacy over Africans, Asians, and Americans. Meanwhile, they were accompanied by a battle to ensure the legacies of capitalism, imperialism, and slavery.¹ But American geographer, historian, and ornithologist Jared Diamond made flamboyant attempts to disprove the aforementioned assertions of racial superiority. Jared Diamond has authored well-known popular science books such as *The Third Chimpanzee*, *Collapse*, and *The World until Yesterday*, *Upheaval*, and *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Among his fathomable works, the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” which was published in 1997, is the focus of this review.

In his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the author irradiates so many intricate aspects of the fates of human societies. The book attempts to answer the question posed by Guinea’s charismatic leader, Yali: why did human development proceed at such different rates on different continents? And to answer Yali’s quest, the book is thematically organized into four parts and nineteen chapters.

The book’s first section, “From Eden to Cajamarca,” is divided into three chapters. This section presents a journey through human evolution and history, tracing the spread of humans from Africa to other continents. Additionally, it examines the effects of continental environments on human history over the past 13,000 years. The capture of the last independent Inca emperor, Atahualpa, by Francisco Pizarro and his small band of conquistadores in Cajamarca, described as the most dramatic encounter in history, is also presented in this section.

The book’s second part, organized into seven chapters, is entitled “The Rise and Spread of Food Production.” Overall, the section thus focuses on the ultimate causes of Pizarro’s triumph. It explores the various factors driving the shift from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle to food production. Additionally, it looks at the immediate factors behind Europe’s conquest of Native Americans, such as Spanish germs, horses, literacy, political organization, and technology. The hard part of the section is identifying the ultimate causes leading to them and the actual outcome.

The third part of the book, which is divided into four chapters, benevolences the connections between ultimate and proximate causes, such as the progression of guns, germs, and steel production, the trait of dense human populations, the rise of food production, and the invention of writing. Hence, the section exemplifies how food production enabled farmers to support full-time craft specialists, politicians, chiefs, kings, and bureaucrats, which were essential for governing large and populous domains. The political environment of hunter-gatherers’ was limited to their territory and alliances, leading to the rise of chiefs, kings, and bureaucrats.

The book’s last section is organized into five chapters entitled “Around the World.” This part, it looks at the histories of Australia and New Guinea, two countries whose food production did not grow on their own. The integrated developments in Australia and New

Guinea are also presented from the standpoint of the entire region, which includes the East Asian mainland and Pacific islands. Finally, it elaborates on the differences between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas in terms of domestic able plants and animals, bacteria, the duration of human settlement, the orientation of the continental axes, and ecological barriers.

So many new arguments make Jared Diamond’s book dazzling. His first point is what is known as “geographic determinism.” He made an eye-opening argument that the dramatic disparities in the long-term histories of the various peoples of different continents were not caused by inherent distinctions in the peoples themselves. Instead, geographical locations have influenced various world developments. Among the authors’ most reliable examples are the Moriori and Maori peoples of New Zealand, peoples of the same race as siblings from Polynesia but whose geographic differences have led to different economic lifestyles. According to him, the difference in IQ between the individuals living in the same country is caused by differences in geographic locations, their social environment, and access to technology and education. (pp.22-25)

Jared Diamond also makes the astounding claim that “necessity is the mother of invention.” He asserted that high population density, disease, technology, political organizations, and other elements of power were all caused by following the domestication of plants and animals. According to Diamond, those who coincidentally inherited or created food products and technologies due to their geographic location were able to engulf those who were less geographically endowed. (p.386)

Another interesting argument by Jared Diamond is the basis of European imperialism: they take advantage of the metaphors, “first come, first served” and “haves over have notes.” Accordingly, Europeans took advantage of military technology based on guns, steel weapons, and horses; infectious germs; maritime technology; and centralized political organization more than the other continents. For instance, the author notes that smallpox, measles, influenza, typhus, bubonic plague, and other infectious diseases made it easier for

Eurasia to annex regions such as the Aztecs, pre- Columbian Native Americans, Tonga, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands. (p.76)

Jared Diamond also summed up the “universality of human creativity.” Accordingly, whatever the difference in geography as well as the environment, every human society developed its own creativity in different aspects and diffused it. This is evidenced in Sumerian and Mesoamerican written developments. Therefore, geography also affects written dissemination. (p.222) According to Jared Diamond, the immediate cause of the inequities in the modern world is the technological and political balkanization that began about the year 1500 AD. Surprisingly, he tried to foresee the future developments of historical science. (p. 421)

Personally, I don't think Jared Diamond is right to say that it is geography as a whole that determines human history. Hence, he refused to acknowledge the considerable human or artificial influences on geography and the environment. Regarding the final destination of societies, Jared Diamond refrained from conveying the intention behind those societies that did not adopt or diffuse new crops, livestock, and technologies. (p.154)

Jared Diamond knowingly or unknowingly overlooked the ancient Ethiopian domestication of plants such as *teff*, *nug*, *enset*, and *dagussa*. (p. 100, 101, 126). In addition, in his debate about the origin of animal pathogens and their dissemination from Eurasia to the rest of the continents, he also refrained from presenting the case of smallpox epidemics in Ethiopia and South Arabia. In fact, Arab traditions and some literary works attest to an outbreak of smallpox among Aksumite soldiers around 370 AD in Saudi Arabia.²

Moreover, I have doubts about the writer's generalization of the people of areas with head starts on food production, thereby gaining a head start on the path leading towards guns, germs, and steel. (p.103) and also, his generalization of geography merely affects the fate of human civilization. Hence, to me, his generalization may be nullified by the case of the Nile River Valley civilization and culture of Egypt

and Ethiopia. Hence, the above-mentioned civilization has a long history of domestication of plants and animals with suitable geography, but they did not develop guns, germs, and steel. In addition, there are some technical irregularities related to using generic terms and word selections, like the writer simultaneously using the term colonialism for those native peoples and newcomers who control the land. It is better to say colony as well as a settler for the first one.

Lastly, Jared Diamond's knowledge, experience, and use of interdisciplinary sciences, different figures, and illustrations enabled his work to exemplify the nature of the entire world's civilization, which was shaped and reshaped by lopsided outcomes. And I agreed with his quote: “History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among people's environments, not because of biological differences among people themselves.” (p. 25)

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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