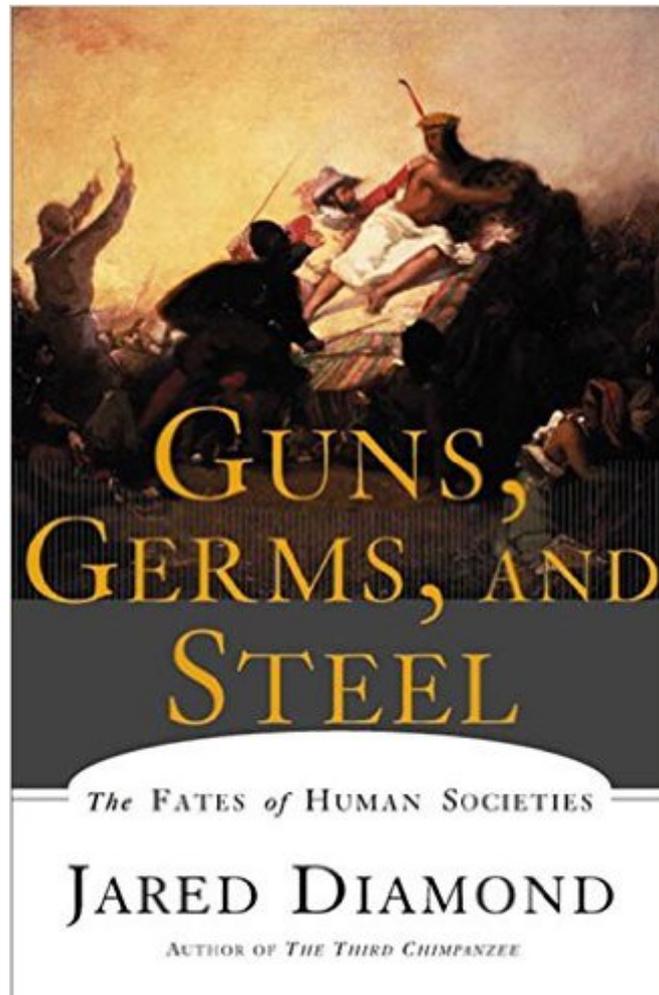


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Guns, Germs, And Steel: The Fates Of Human Societies



Synopsis

"Fascinating.... Lays a foundation for understanding human history." •Bill Gates In this "artful, informative, and delightful" (William H. McNeill, New York Review of Books) book, Jared Diamond convincingly argues that geographical and environmental factors shaped the modern world. Societies that had had a head start in food production advanced beyond the hunter-gatherer stage, and then developed religion --as well as nasty germs and potent weapons of war --and adventured on sea and land to conquer and decimate preliterate cultures. A major advance in our understanding of human societies, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* chronicles the way that the modern world came to be and stunningly dismantles racially based theories of human history. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science, the Rhone-Poulenc Prize, and the Commonwealth club of California's Gold Medal.

Book Information

Series: *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1st edition (April 1, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393317552

ISBN-13: 978-0393317558

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 1.5 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (2,243 customer reviews)

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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 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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