



Book Review

Guns, Germs, and Steel

The Fates of Human Societies

by [Jared Diamond](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer

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On November 16, 1532, at the town of Cajamarca in Peru, the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro captured Atahualpa, the last emperor of the Incas. The scene is reproduced in a painting by Sir John Everett Millais that appears on the jacket of Jared Diamond's new book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

How was it, Diamond asks, that Pizarro could carry out this stunning victory? Was it just an accident of history? Or were there deeper underlying reasons? "We can identify the chain of proximate factors that enabled Pizarro to capture Atahualpa," Diamond writes, "and that operated in European conquests of other Native American societies as well. Those factors included Spanish germs, horses, literacy, political organization, and technology (especially ships and weapons)." In short: guns, germs, and steel.

These may strike us as very basic reasons, but the object of Diamond's book is to lay bare reasons that are even more basic: not the proximate causes for Pizarro's victory, but the ultimate ones. The ultimate causes, Diamond argues, are environmental: the areas of the continental landmasses, their orientation (north-south or east-west), and the number of plants and animals on each continent that were suitable for agriculture or domestication. Even before the "starting line" of 11,000 BC -- the point at which human settlement had spread through the Americas, the last Ice Age ended, and people began to domesticate plants and animals -- the inhabitants of certain parts of the world had a head start.

To oversimplify Diamond's book-length argument, the people of Eurasia developed complex, specialized, and technologically advanced civilizations more rapidly than the rest of the world because their continent had the largest landmass, because it was oriented on a generally east-west axis, and because evolution favored it with the greatest number of animals suitable for riding, traction, and food, and the greatest number of plants suitable for agriculture. Of the 56 species of wild grass with the largest seeds, it seems, 32 are concentrated in the Fertile Crescent or elsewhere in the Mediterranean. "That fact alone goes a long way toward explaining the course of human history."

Blessed with these advantages, the early Eurasians began to keep animals and to grow grains, rather than to roam for sustenance as hunter-gatherers. A reliable food supply made it possible to feed bigger communities and to support "specialists" such as artists and storytellers, and the chiefs and bureaucrats that orderly life in bigger communities required. Innovations such as writing and the wheel spread throughout the continent together with crops and farming techniques -- a process made easier because they could spread in an east-west direction within the same latitudes and climate zones. Finally, by sharing germs with their domestic animals, the Eurasians caught diseases (and developed resistances to them) that would prove devastating when they came into contact with other peoples.

The implication is that Europe (and, at the other end of the continent, China) gained dominance over much of the world not because of any superiority over the people they conquered but because of their environments. Diamond demonstrates that the traditional peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas had an encyclopedic knowledge of their local flora and fauna, making it inconceivable that they could have neglected to use a usable plant or animal. Nor were they hobbled by cultural conservatism, as the immediate adoption of guns and horses by the Plains Indians of the American West shows. Therefore *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is a powerful antidote to racist arguments (or unspoken assumptions) that traditional people are "primitive" not just in their technology but in themselves. Diamond maintains that the New Guineans he has worked with for over 30 years are at least as intelligent as Westerners, and probably more so: because their children spend almost all their time actively playing and interacting with other people rather than being passively entertained by TV, and because the survival of Westerners has historically been based on their resistance to epidemic diseases (i.e., body chemistry) rather than their ability to find food and to avoid murder, accidents, or death in battle -- for which intelligence is a key advantage. (This second argument, though it is made on behalf of a "primitive" people, would seem to veer dangerously close to the racist beliefs of 19th-century Social Darwinism, implying as it does that "civilized" society allows less intelligent individuals to survive and reproduce, bringing

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down the average level of intelligence.)

As farming developed, the bigger, denser populations it made possible drove fast-track societies -- with their rapidly developing weapons and technology -- to search for more land and more resources. To illustrate this process, Diamond highlights a historical conquest that is much less familiar (to us Westerners) than the European conquest of Africa and the Americas: the Austronesian expansion into Southeast Asia. As they hopped from island to island, moving as their settlements became too crowded, the Austronesians, who came from what is today China, provided a test case of how deeply environment shapes the destiny of peoples. Though they came from the same racial stock, the Austronesians who settled on larger islands with more natural resources -- like the Maori of New Zealand -- developed more technological, more specialized, and more warlike societies that overwhelmed and destroyed "backward" peoples when they encountered them.

Guns, Germs, and Steel makes its argument with admirable clarity, moving with impressive ease from continental trends to the fascinating minutiae that bolster its basic points. The book makes a convincing case that it is environmental factors that have given some societies an edge over others, and the ammunition it provides in demolishing racist beliefs is most welcome. But a more troubling message emerges indirectly: that technological societies not only can overcome less technological ones but almost always do so when given half a chance. To what extent this is a given of human societies, or of human biology, is an important question that requires another book as wide-ranging and clear-sighted as this one.

About the Reviewer

Geoff Wisner is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.



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