

## Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies

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**Author:**

Jared Diamond

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**Reviewer:**

Tom Tomlinson

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,*

*Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat*

*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth*

*When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.*

[Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West' (1889)]

This book is inspired by just such a cross-cultural encounter as that between Kamal the border raider and the Colonel's son of the Guides. In the first chapter the author recounts a conversation that he, a biologist studying bird evolution, had in New Guinea in 1972 with Yali, a local politician preparing his people for self-government, which culminated in the searching question 'Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo [goods] and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own' [p. 14]. 'Yali's question' plays a central role in Professor Diamond's enquiry into 'a short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years', leading him into a wide-ranging discussion of the history of human evolution and diversity through a study of migration, socio-economic and cultural adaptation to environmental conditions, and technological diffusion. The result is an exciting and absorbing account of human history since the Pleistocene age, which culminates in a sketch of a future scientific basis for studying the history of humans

that will command the same intellectual respect as current scientific studies of the history of other natural phenomena such as dinosaurs, nebulas and glaciers.

This is an ambitious project, and no reviewer can comment on all of it with equal authority. My own background as an historian of European expansion and Asian response over the last two hundred years requires me to take most of the account of prehistory on trust - which is a drawback since Diamond asserts that most of the really important influences on modern history had already occurred before the birth of Christ. To a non-specialist, the account of human prehistory presented here seems plausible and well-founded - the argument is that, as *homo sapiens* evolved in Africa and migrated to colonise first Asia, then Europe, then Australia, and finally the Americas, so a technical progression from hunting to settled agriculture, and a societal progression from warring bands to complex sedentary civilisations took place largely determined by the environmental conditions in which different branches of the same species found themselves. Where plants and animals could easily be domesticated, as in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, settled agriculture emerged first, and was then diffused to other suitable areas.

The development of surplus food-producing societies with high population densities provided humans with resistance to the diseases carried by their domesticated flocks, and facilitated other technological changes - especially the development of systems of specialised knowledge that led to advances in metallurgy, literacy and socio-economic organisation - primarily within the Eurasian supercontinent, and its outlying regions in the western Pacific and northern Africa, where the environment, and the geographical networks of migration, trade and communication, most favoured their spread. Diffusion is the key concept here - some continents and regions were more favourable than others, because of internal or external connections. As a result, when the scattered branches of the human species were reunited by trans-oceanic voyages and mercantile capitalism after 1500, Old World invaders had a decisive advantage over their New World cousins - the development of guns, germs and steel ensured that Europeans settled the Americas, Oceania and Southern Africa, eliminating or subduing local populations unable to resist them.

Professor Diamond's main concern is to reject any simple racial explanation of the apparent differences in material culture between different regions of the planet. In particular, he argues that there is no essential difference in intelligence between races; indeed, those who are able to survive in harsh and dangerous environments, such as New Guinea, are likely to be more intelligent than those living a sheltered and sedentary existence in the United States, since mere survival requires much greater skills in the former than in the latter. Much of his evidence here is anecdotal - accounts of his own experiences with 'primitive' peoples, and their capacity to adapt to severe environments or respond successfully to new technologies. This seems an entirely appropriate starting point for a multi-cultural world, and one that is logical for an evolutionary biologist. No-one claims that the predatory activity of magpies that has diminished stocks of song-birds in British suburban gardens has occurred because magpies are cleverer than thrushes, but simply because they are better adapted to take advantage of changes in environmental circumstances. The photographic illustrations in the book - 32 plates of human faces drawn from different racial groups around the world - are intended to illustrate this point, although they bear a striking resemblance to the albums of 'native types' that used to grace the catalogues of colonial photographers as part of a very different discourse.

Given the magnitude of the task he has set himself, it is inevitable that Professor Diamond uses very broad brush-strokes to fill in his argument. This style is further exaggerated by his desire to identify 'ultimate' explanations rather than mere 'proximate' ones. Thus behind the proximate explanation of the dominance of Old World societies and technologies over the last two thousand years (guns, germs and steel) lurks an ultimate explanation - why bronze tools appeared early in parts of Eurasia, late and only locally in the New World, and never, before European settlement, in Australasia. One result is that many of the concerns of practising historians who are trying to grapple with part of the same agenda are given little attention. The spread of technology, and of the military conquests and economic changes that it has wrought over the past thousand years, is dismissed as largely a question of historical accident. For Diamond, technology is about inventiveness, and all peoples are equally inventive given the right circumstances. Even more compressed is the account of socio-political institutions on which many other analyses of the modern world depend. Here the entire history of political thought and state-formation from Aristotle onwards is covered in a couple of

pages, most of which is devoted to hydraulic theories [pp. 282-4], while all societies more complex than an egalitarian tribe are dismissed as 'kleptocracies' that use control of literacy and organised religion to create legitimacy for self-serving elites that extract tribute to provide inefficient public services. [p. 276ff]. Remarkably, for a book on this subject, there is only one brief mention of capitalism [p. 250], where it is listed as one of ten plausible but incomplete explanations of technical progress in Europe. It is significant that 'Yali's question' with which the book begins was 'why is it that you white people developed so much cargo .. but we black people had little cargo of our own?', not 'why do the top ten per cent of white people have so much cargo, but the bottom ten per cent have so little?', or 'why is so much of the cargo in the world manufactured in the United States?'. A book seeking to answer such questions would have to add a fourth totem of Western progress to its title and be called, perhaps, *Guns, Germs, Steel and Coca-Cola*.

This approach distances Diamond's analysis from much of the current literature on cultural interactions in modern history - indeed, his suggestions for further reading omit almost all of the standard literature on the history of imperialism and post-colonialism, world-systems, underdevelopment or socio-economic change over the last five hundred years. Thus the large debate that is currently going on over historical explanations of the wealth and poverty of nations in a global context is here reduced to a sub-set of the ultimate question about bronze tools and geographic connectedness - 'technology may have developed most rapidly in regions with moderate connectedness [Europe], neither too high [China], nor too low [India]' [p. 416]. For a sample of the wider debate, see the active correspondence about 'Eurocentrism' in the H-World list sparked off by Brad de Long's review of David Landes's forthcoming *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Are Some So Rich and Others So Poor?* dated 28.3.98. While Diamond gives 'cultural idiosyncrasies' some role in explaining differential progress in material culture, and are singled out as an important factor in making history unpredictable (as in the account given of the Chinese decision in the early fifteenth century to ban merchant fleets as a result of court intrigue, which allegedly destroyed her medieval technological leadership in Eurasia), these are seen as simply accidents of history - on a par with the failure of the July Plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944. There may be societal variation in the level of receptiveness to innovation (as shown by different responses by non-European peoples to the arrival of European technologies in the nineteenth century), but this simply demonstrates that, on the grand scale, some societies on all continents would have had equal chances to achieve technological progress if their environments had been equally favourable [p. 411ff].

In contrast with the very compressed accounts of the socio-economic and political history of the settled world, Professor Diamond's frequent recounting of his personal experiences in New Guinea bring his arguments into sharper focus. They also suggest irresistible comparisons with events nearer home. The intriguing account of the reaction of various tribes to contact with the modern world over the last fifty years provides a startling perspective on events in other isolated and unworldly communities, such as the History departments of British universities. We can all identify the Chimbu tribe, which responded to contact with the outside world within a single generation by growing coffee as a cash-crop, and establishing saw-mills and trucking companies to grow rich, and also their neighbours, the Daribi, who are described as 'especially conservative and uninterested in new technology', who have tried, unsuccessfully, to ignore all pressures to change and who are now being taken over by the Chimbu [252]. Best of all is the description of the Fayu, a tribe of about 400 hunter-gatherers that normally live as single family units, meeting only occasionally to arrange marriages. Such meetings are frightening events since murder and revenge-killings are a common occurrence that had led to the reduction of the tribe from over 2,000 to 400 within living memory. At a typical meeting,

one Fayu man spotted the man who had killed his father. The son raised his ax and rushed at the murderer but was wrestled to the ground by friends; then the murderer came to the prostrate son with an ax and was also wrestled down. Both men were held, screaming with rage, until they seemed sufficiently exhausted to be released. Other men periodically shouted insults at each other, shook with anger and frustration, and pounded the ground with their axes [266].

An exact description of the last meeting of the Faculty Resource Allocation Committee! Missionary intervention has since 'saved' the Fayu: what price the QAA?

A future historian coming across this book in a thousand years time would have no doubt that it was written by an American. The underlying vision of humanity as a salad-bowl made up of distinct and insoluble ethnic identities would provide a clue, and the stress on the arrival of Old World technologies and pathogens in the New World as the archetypal event of human diffusion and coalescence would confirm this. Yet, while the impact of Eurasian diseases (assisted by enslavement and severe degradation in living conditions) on the indigenous populations of the New World was a cataclysmic historical event, but it was not entirely without precedent elsewhere. The effect of plague, especially the Black Death of the fourteenth century, on Asian, European and North African peoples and societies was similar in some respects, as was the impact of smallpox and cholera in east and central Africa in the nineteenth century. More generally, the use of Eurasia as a meaningful geographical expression in historical terms is a hall-mark of a transatlantic focus (it is also prominent in the work of Alfred Crosby, for example). Such a viewpoint over-simplifies a large body of complex human experience, since much of the history of conquest, settlement and exploitation in the modern world is in fact concerned with what might be termed 'Eurasian civil wars' - from the Neolithic invasion of Europe, via the activities of Genghis Khan and his successors, to the fall of Constantinople, the arrival of European armed traders in the East in the sixteenth century, and full-blown European imperialism after 1750. The European empires of conquest in Asia, especially those of the British in India and the Dutch in Java, were not based on clear technological superiority in armaments, nor on the spread of disease, but they spawned a sense of 'otherness' and an attitude of cultural and racial superiority at least as intense as that aroused by colonisation in the New World. In Africa, too, European imperial troops (often of African or Indian origin) exploited only a limited and short-lived technical superiority in weaponry that lasted from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

Authors cannot be blamed for the publisher's blurbs on their book-jackets, but it may be significant that this work is described there as a work of 'popular science', not as a work of history. Professor Diamond's most contentious argument, by far, is his conclusion that the logical consistency and precision of current discoveries in archaeology and prehistory make it possible to foresee the future of human history as a science. There are a number of difficulties here. Any 'science of human history' is likely to be based on a search for laws, processes and explanations that are rooted in the agenda of the 'new', processualist archaeology that was pioneered by the work of Lewis Binford and others in the 1960s and 1970s. Such approaches have now been undermined by other theoretical approaches which deny the possibility of establishing general laws, stress the social, cultural and gendered nature of archaeological knowledge and explanation, and seek to uncover 'the archaeology of the mind' and the spirit. Diamond's use of contemporary ethnographic observations of some peoples to provide explanations of the prehistoric past of all peoples can be questioned on methodological grounds, and his refusal to place the knowledge he uses in its historiographical context weakens the force of his arguments as historical explanations. There is another set of problems here, too. The history of humans cannot properly be equated with the history of dinosaurs, glaciers or nebulas, because these natural phenomena do not consciously create the evidence on which we try to understand them, nor can we detect a human consciousness in their actions. Most important of all, human history requires history to be studied on a human scale, so that we can empathise with the past, and see it in the context of our present humanity. Here there is nothing between the minute and the monumental - anecdotal accounts of random individuals at moments in their lives, and the huge sweep of whole peoples and continents across millennia.

These cavils are to be expected. Historians cannot allow scientists to tell them how to do their job; if they did, then history would vanish for ever into the intellectual establishment of rational positivism, and would lose its capacity - to which Professor Diamond is sensitive - to unite beliefs about the present with an understanding of the past in ways that can influence the future. Yet despite its inevitable minor flaws, this book remains a very impressive achievement of imagination and exposition, which tells us much about the interaction between 'civilised' minds and 'primitive' peoples at the end of the second millennium of the Christian era. To end, as we began, with a nineteenth-century perspective on such matters:

*Though I've belted you and flayed you*

*By the livin' Gawd that made you*

*You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!*

[Rudyard Kipling, 'Gunga Din' (1894)]

The author regrets that he is unable to respond to the review or enter into any dialogue due to outstanding commitments.

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