

Book Review

Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, by Jared Diamond, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 494 pages.

The nineteen chapters of the book are organized in four main parts; each dealing with the story of human societies on earth in the last 13, 000 years or so. Its very title: “*Guns, Germs and Steel*,” appears to captures the essence of the book that economic and technological (especially military) advantages, and the animal-driven diseases (germs) introduced by Europeans enabled the latter to control and reshape a great portion of the world, particularly the Americas, Australia and Africa. Diamond maintains that such technological and economic differences and the immunity of West Eurasians to animal-born contagious diseases were initially brought by climatic and environmental differences among the human societies of the world. In other words, such initial advantages helped West Eurasians to develop at a much rapid pace which enabled them to conquer native populations in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and the Pacific Ocean.

Therefore, the crux of the author’s argument is that the ultimate cause for the different courses of history of different groups of people of the world rested on the influence of the environment, and not on the intelligence, superior culture, economic success or the like which are proximate factors. Almost all the discussions throughout the book revolve around this main premise. However, this oversimplification is open for criticism in that the author has safely neglected the roles of culture, religion and financial institutions, powerful political leaders, World Wars and small group of people in determining human destiny, creating differences in human history and allowing the control of some societies by others.

In terms of methodology, the book is pioneering, well researched, substantive and written in a concise language. The author adopted an interdisciplinary approach and has synthesized existing knowledge from many disciplines such as history, archeology, linguistics, medicine, biology, anthropology, geography and others. Historians, social scientists, or any person interested in the topic can easily understand the main themes and discussions of the book. It seems that the author wanted to demonstrate that history can be studied in terms the sciences. In discussing about his premise and arguments, Diamond consistently poses important questions throughout the book to guide his readers and systematically addresses these questions one by one. In so doing, Diamond makes a full circle as he begins and ends his argumentative discussion trying to solve an important question raised by a Papua New Guinean named Yali: “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought

it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo for our own?” However, although there is an extended list of further reading materials, the book lacks foot notes and a bibliographic list of references.

Given the innovative (original) approach adopted by the author; that is, a scientific model to human history, it is difficult to out rightly accept or reject his argument or to decide on the aptness of his methodology. But, it can be said that though the topics dealt were quite broad, the author’s use of persuasive arguments has rendered the book interesting and easy to grasp. *Guns, Germs and Steel* is an essential read for historians at least for two reasons. The first is that in discussing the causatives of historical developments up to the modern era, Diamond reminds us the need for paying attention to the beginning of humankind on earth. The other thing is that in an effort to introduce a new paradigm, the author encourages historians to consider the impacts of geography and climate, in addition to the human factors, in their studies about the evolution of human societies, development of civilizations and the cultural, technological, economic differences among the peoples of the world from the earliest times to the present.

In most of the first ten chapters (parts I and II), Diamond argues that the availability of environmental necessities (plants and animal species) in Eurasia were the most important explanatory factors for the transition of human society from hunter gatherer way of life to that of food production in an earliest period of time. The east-west orientation and the huge land mass were additional advantages for Eurasia in terms of cultivation and food production. The surplus production of surplus food led to population growth, and specializations of labor (agriculture, trade, mining, writing, etc.) within dense populations led to accumulated social and technological innovations which were important to conquer other weaker social groups. Large and organized societies with surplus food and more advanced technologies formed national states and empires.

The analyses in chapter two focus on the influence of ecology on human migration, settlement, domestication of plants and animals and food production. Here, Diamond maintains that people and ethnic groups of the same origin evolved differently due to ecological difference. Using the case of the Polynesians as example (Mori and Maori societies), the author “illustrates how environments can affect economy, technology, political organization, and fighting skills within a short time”. (p. 57). Diamond describes such phenomena as “natural experiment” (the title of chapter two). The other important point

raised by Diamond is why West Eurasians, and not East Asians (China), has dominated the world in the last 500 years? He contends that, unlike in China, the development of competing nation states in Western Eurasia due to geographical fragmentation led to the development of technology by avoiding stagnation, which enabled them to dominate the world (p.9).

In most sections of the book the author also discusses about the confrontation between the food producers and food collectors, and shows the domination of the former over the latter. For instance, in chapter three Diamond states that in the relatively recent times, thanks to civilization, European conquests (since the great divergence, 1500 AD), using the guns, germs and steel, led to the confrontation of different cultures. The author cites as an example the colonization of the Inca Empire in 1532 by small group of Spanish conquistadors using technology (guns, steel weapons and ships), domestic animals (horse), germs and writing. Diamond also utilizes the same logic to explain why Atahualpa did not instead try to conquer Spain?

Part II of the book entitled: "The Rise and Spread of Food Production" comprises chapters from four to ten. In these chapters the author elucidates as to how and when food production began in the world, which took place first in some selected places of the world. Diamond further states that this was a major divide in human history which led to the emergence of diverse social, cultural, economic and political branches of people in the world. The author is also of the opinion that "food production evolved as a by-product of [separate] decisions made with-out awareness of their consequences." (p. 106). The main factors for the spread of food production are, as discussed in chapter six, decline in the availability of wild food, cumulative development of technologies for collecting, processing and storing, and rise in human population density. Other points Diamond raised in this part of the book include his attempt to provide answers for two important questions: why did some regions failed to domesticate plants and why were most big wild animal species never domesticated? For the latter question, the author begins his discussions with a famous quote from Leo Tolstoy's classic novel *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (p.157). Thus, implying his belief that all animal species were not good nominees for domestication by humankind.

Furthermore, part III of the book entitled: "From Food to Guns, Germs, and Steel," (Chapters 11 to 14) mainly deals with, since the great divergence (1500 AD), West Eurasians thanks to the guns, Germs and steel have dominated the world, particularly the Americas,

Australia and Africa. Europeans conquered others due to their technological superiority, and the germs to which the latter were immune also decimated the indigenous populations of these parts of the world. Even the most recent phenomena of industrial revolution and urbanization were derived from the beginning and speared of food production. The advantages of the old world, the determinants of civilization, the difference between the “haves” and the “have nots”, mainly the evolution of the germs and technology are also thoroughly discussed in chapter 11 and chapter 13. In chapter 12 Diamond focuses on the origin and gradual refinement of writing; in Chapter 14 he deals with the roles of organized states in the conquest of some by others.

Part IV titled: “Around the World in Five Chapters,” comprises the remaining five short chapters of the book. In this concluding section the various episodes and processes of food production, human migration and confrontations mentioned in parts II and III are analyzed for each of the continents and some important islands such as Australia, New Guinea, East Asia, Austronesia, America and Africa. In other words, the discussions in these five chapters further explain most of the points raised in the previous chapters. Among others, Diamond compares the histories of the Old and the New Worlds in terms of the dates for the beginning of agriculture, metallurgy, states and writing. For instance, he argues that “...The same factors that molded Europeans' encounters with Africans molded their encounters with native Americans as well.” (pp. 31, 398). The other point is that despite geographical proximity, Australians and Papua New Guineans had different histories as a result of environmental difference and ecological barriers. Ecological difference in Africa also led to the displacement of Pygmies and Khoisan by the iron technology using Bantu peoples.

In the epilogue Diamond suggests geographical fragmentation to form small political units within Eurasia rather than China explain why Europe eventually took the lead in technological innovation and stagnation in China (pp. 9, 413-414).

Geremew Eskezia, Bahr Dar University