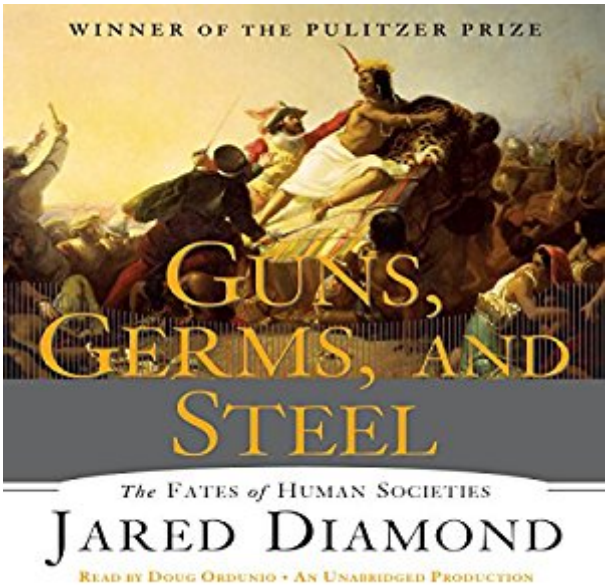
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Guns, Germs And Steel: The Fate Of Human Societies



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Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize, General Nonfiction, 1998 Guns, Germs and Steel examines the rise of civilization and the issues its development has raised throughout history. Having done field work in New Guinea for more than 30 years, Jared Diamond presents the geographical and ecological factors that have shaped the modern world. From the viewpoint of an evolutionary biologist, he highlights the broadest movements both literal and conceptual on every continent since the Ice Age, and examines societal advances such as writing, religion, government, and technology. Diamond also dissects racial theories of global history, and the resulting work-Guns, Germs and Steel-is a major contribution to our understanding the evolution of human societies.

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Customer Reviews

Two decades ago a UCLA geography professor named Jared Diamond published Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies. Diamond hypothesized that the arc of human history was dramatically shifted by geographic, environmental, biological, and other factors, resulting in the worldwide dominance of the leading industrial powers during the past 500 years. The book won a 1997 Pulitzer Prize and quickly became a New York Times bestseller.Why is economic development so uneven around the world?Diamond posed questions fundamental to the experience of the human race. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Why did wealth and power [among nations] become distributed as they now are, rather than in some other way?ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“[W]hy did human development proceed at such different rates on different continents?ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“[W]hy were Europeans, rather than Africans or Native Americans, the ones to end

up with guns, the nastiest germs, and steel?ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• In his award-winning book, Diamond posited a ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“unified synthesisÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •a unified field theory of history. Drawing from his wide-ranging knowledge of medicine, evolutionary biology, physiology, linguistics, and anthropology as well as geography, he surveyed the history of the past 13,000 years and identified plausible answers to the questions he had posed. In the process, he wrote what I consider to be the single most illuminating book on the history of the human race.Academic critics howledHowever, academic critics howled shortly after the publication of Guns, Germs, and Steel: They referred to supposed errors in geography and history, which I find largely pointless. For example, geographers complained that Diamond referred to Eurasia as a single continent rather than separately to Asia, North Africa, and Europe. ThatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s nitpicking, as far as IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢m concerned. And many of these ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“errorsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• could simply be differences of opinion. Academics are unbearably dogmatic and dismissive of those who reject their pet theories. Some accused him of racism, although he rejected racist explanations early, forcefully, and often. That criticism is not only unsupported by DiamondÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s book, itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s insulting to the reader. The most common and far-reaching complaint was that Diamond had succumbed to the heresy of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“environmental determinism.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Understandably, Diamond grounded his argument in geographic and environmental factorsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •but he repeatedly cited numerous other influences as well. Ultimately, of course, everything we humans do, and everything weÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ve done in the millions of years since our ancestors first climbed out of the trees, has been environmentally determined. There were complaints that Diamond had overlooked the contrast between temperate and tropical zones (he didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t) and that he had only explained what happened 500 years ago but not subsequently (untrue). It might appear that at least some of DiamondÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s critics never read the book. However, the most aggravating criticism was that he had ignored the motives that led the industrial nations to undertake colonialism and imperialism on a broad scale. Diamond addressed only the means that enabled the colonial powers to dominate, not the reasons why they chose to do so. To my mind, thatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s no error. He didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t pretend to explain colonialism and imperialism, merely to describe how it had become possible.Is it possible that most of these academic critics were simply bitter that Diamond hadnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t cited their own specialized research?The roots of academic criticismThough the critics undoubtedly uncovered a misplaced fact or unwarranted conclusion here and there through the book, the errors were exceedingly minor in the context of DiamondÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s expansive hypothesis. It should be clear to any dispassionate reader

that the academic reaction stemmed, above all, from narrow-mindedness and jealousy. The world of academia today is atomized. Specialties, sub-specialties, and sub-sub-specialties abound. ItÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s not unusual for a scholar to build a career on the study of a single obscure question that, when answered, will be of interest to virtually nobody. Interdisciplinary studies are frowned upon in most academic circles. Generalists are regarded as ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“not serious.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• And scholars who write popular books, must less bestsellers, can expect a chilly reception from their peers.A wealth of meaning behind the titleTo understand where the academic critics went wrong, itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s useful to look at what Diamond signified by his title, Guns, Germs, and Steel. Early in his book, he dwells on the confrontation between the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro and the Inca god-king Atahuallpa. ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The immediate reasons for PizarroÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s success included military technology based on guns, steel weapons [such as swords and daggers], and horses; infectious diseases endemic in Eurasia; European maritime technology; the centralized political organization of European states; and writing. The title of this book will serve as shorthand for those proximate factors.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•DiamondÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s argument in a nutshellIn a Prologue, Diamond poses the question at the heart of this book. He quotes a friend in what is now Papua New Guinea from a conversation in 1972, when he was studying bird evolution there:

ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã ËœWhy 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?'ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• To answer the question, Diamond begins his story around the year 11,000 BCE, when the last Ice Age was drawing to a close and human beings were beginning to form villages in a few places around the world. ItÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s unclear whether the formation of villages preceded the deliberate cultivation and production of food, or vice versa. However, regardless of the sequence, that shift from hunter-gatherer society to agriculturally based settlements set in motion the course of events that have led to the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“civilizationÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• in which we live.Diamond argues, convincingly, that the much greater availability of domesticable plants and large animals in Eurasia than in sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. Furthermore, he explains that the east-west orientation of Eurasia from the Bering Strait to the Atlantic Ocean made it possible for the development of agriculture and animal husbandry to spread quickly to distant lands. By contrast, the north-south orientation of the Americas and sub-Saharan AfricaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •and the presence of barriers such as the Sahara Desert, the Panamanian Isthmus, and the deserts of northern Mexico and southwestern United StatesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •impeded the spread of these (and, later, other) new technologies to the extremities of those continents. The advent of food production enabled the

development of ever-larger settlements. This, in turn, spelled the emergence of labor specialization and eventually the growth of empires as well as the appearance and spread of communicable diseases contracted from domesticated animals. Those differences in historical development eventually led to the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“guns, germs, and steelÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• that made Eurasian dominance possibleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •and dictated the huge differences in economic development between what today we call East and West.Guns, Germs, and Steel is crammed with facts and densely written. It doesnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t make for light reading. But if you have any interest in understanding how the world came to be as it is, youÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ll find this book highly rewarding.

Few centuries ago, human societies were separated by our vast oceans, say Europeans and Americans. They meet up in several bloody events. But what made the Spaniards vastly superior than the Mayans? Jared dared to answer such question using the three things in the title: guns, germs and steel. He concludes that geography and political structure matters but race does not! This book opens fire towards our understanding of humans societies. It will also contaminate your reasoning for the better. It may also slice prejudices shinning bright light over history of human development.

If you decide to tackle "Guns, Germs, and Steel," it would be advantageous to read chunks of the book or at least a full chapter instead of a few pages at a time. Despite a few personal stories involving the people of New Guinea, Mr. Diamond’s work is very academic in its delivery. It’s too bad the guy doesn’t have the writing flair of Bill Bryson. Don’t get me wrong, it’s an interesting read, but I wonder how many people who bought this thing actually read it from cover to cover? There are portions where he lists a variety of examples to support his argument, but the stuff started evolving into so much information-overload gibberish. I challenge anyone to remember all the island names and whatnot in the chapter entitled "Speedboat to Polynesia." If you can, then congratulations! You have the big brain.The author culls information from a variety of scientific disciplines to support his very convincing argument. Mr. Diamond blows a huge whole through the racist attitude that some races are superior to others. He also unintentionally makes a mockery, without mentioning them, of the monumentally nutty Ken Ham’s Creation Museum and his delusional ilk. Mr. Diamond stresses that "Guns, Germs, and Steel" is a broad overview of how people, plants, animals, and, most importantly, societies evolved. He does not claim that everything between the covers of this thing is etched in stone and clearly stresses when certain information is inconclusive.The

Pulitzer-Prize-Winning work is exactly how I'd expect a professor to give a credible presentation. The chapters build upon the previous ones to give the reader a clear picture of how the world's societies evolved. "Guns, Germs, and Steel" is one of those works that give us layman lots to ponder. It was well worth slogging through the thing, but for your normal, everyday Dick or Jane, this isn't like reading a... ehhh... Dick-and-Jane book. It felt like homework.

The book has a wealth of information regarding geophysical factors in human history. Although I believe these factors do not offer a comprehensive historical methodology, the general reader can certainly expand his knowledge of world events with this book. Careful reading shows that some of the conclusions do not always bear out, e.g. the availability theory of domestication. In this instance, the author would have to explain why Laplanders domesticated reindeer (= caribou) but Inuits did not, even though the same species lived in North America as wild animals. Still, the book is intriguing and exciting to read.

Gave me lots and lots to think about. In essence -- from my understanding -- human activity is largely influenced by locale [climate, resources, crops], according to the author. This may or may not be correct. Why do some places with similar environments have such different populations? Why do some cultures, no matter where they go do so much and others so little. Why are people from group x do so much more useful stuff than those from group y. I have my ideas: there is also a culture that people have and I think that it is not closely related to locale. In this way I differ with some of the opinions in this book -- but my ideas are not fixed.

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