

Jennifer Bilek
UNIV 391
Book Review
10-12-15

Book Review

Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, by Jared Diamond, is a critique of Eurasian societies in how and why they have successfully survived and thrived in the world around them. Diamond places a great deal of focus on the geography, environment, and technology of the developing societies. With deep analysis, we are shown the how the Eurasian societies functioned from the hunter and gatherer stages to the more advanced government-run and technology driven stages.

Geography plays a large role by shaping the lands, providing protection with borders, and factoring in how large a population can grow. Geography tells whether a society will be full of herders, hunters, or farmers. Many societies start close to waterways for drinking water, food, and transportation. Diamond discusses how the Polynesian people are able to successfully produce dryland, irrigated, and tree crops even though they are on an island. Depending on the islands region, several different crops are native to different islands, such as coconut, banana, and taro.¹ These crops provide a surplus of food and more work for the laborers, allowing for the expansion of population and society growth. However, geography goes hand in hand with the environmental factors surrounding societies due to their uncontrollable nature.

The natural environment of a society plays a large role in how a society can function. Diamond notes that only in the last 11 thousand years we have come around to create our own food production from domesticating animals and harvesting crops instead

¹ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 59.

of living off the land being hunters and gatherers.² Societies who develop their own production are able to expand their population and become powerful due to their people having food to trade and being healthy. Diamond provides a chart explaining how the domestication of animals and plants can lead to a surplus in food, which leads to larger societies that are able to then dabble into other concerns, such as technology.³

Technology ranges from the creation of an alphabet or calendar to the more advanced creations of gunpowder. Diamond puts it best as, “knowledge brings power.”⁴ To become a progressive society, a society must be very well educated. There needs to be a government, education system, and health system. Diamond notes how uncontacted groups, such as the Amazonian Indians, owe their introduction to the modern world through missionaries. Missionaries are able to bring in skilled individuals, such as doctors and teachers, while also helping to set up a form of government and spread the idea of religion.⁵ One of the largest technologies is the production of gunpowder and its ability to protect societies from enemies. However, it is how a society uses the gunpowder and newfound technologies that wins them their battles.

Diamond does an admirable job discussing how societies have progressed in the new world. Success does not come from being the wisest, but how you use your knowledge to adapt to your living environment. Diamond’s conclusion is that it’s the geography, environment, and technology of a society that paves the way for its success. Societies have been able to thrive in their uncontrollable environments by perfecting their labors in the conditions given to them. By doing so, the societies are able to expand into what we are working towards today.

² Ibid, 82.

³ Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, see chart, 83.

⁴ Ibid, 206.

⁵ Ibid, 255.

Bibliography

Diamond, Jared M. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999.