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October 13, 2014  
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Book Report

*Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* by Jared Diamond, New York, NY, W. W. Norton, 1997.

On the cover of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is the painting *Pizarro Seizing the Inca of Peru*, by Briton John Everett Millais (then 16 years old!), of the Spanish conquistador capturing the Incan emperor Atahualpa. It's one of the stunning conquests of history: Francisco Pizarro and his 168 soldiers routed the 80,000 soldier Incan army, killing 7,000 without losing a one. In the ensuing decades the Aztec, Incan, and Maya nations were decimated and the American continents were primed for centuries of European domination.

European – Diamond calls it Eurasian – domination is the general narrative of history. Western European and some West-Asian epochs emerged early on as the beneficiaries of history; they would export their influence on less-developed continents like Africa, South Asia, and the Americas. It's not a new question to ask – Why did some civilizations dominate others? – but the principal explanation by historians that the peoples inhabiting Eurasia were inherently better at civilization-building and had more powerful ideas and technologies, disposed with favorable genetics or divine favor or both, is not how Diamond answers it. Instead of having winning inspiration, he says, Eurasians were simply lucky to live in Eurasia – if Native Americans and Europeans switched continents the exact same result would occur.

Environmental constraints guide a society's development, is Diamond's argument. "No hunter-gatherer society ever developed states, writing, metal technology, or standing armies," he wrote in a letter to the *New York Review of Books*, "Yet the emergence of such societies in Eurasia was no accident. It had long antecedents with clear environmental causes." What are these causes? Societies evolve from hunter-gatherers on the fulfillment of three conditions: access to high-protein vegetation; climate conducive to long-term food storage; and access to animals which could be domesticated. Eurasia's early advantage was in plants like barley, wheat, and flax; a dry climate and consistent climate; and animals like goats, horses, and cattle. Early Native Americans hunted the few domesticatable animals on the continents to local extinction.

The advantage of fulfilling the three conditions was common around the world, surpluses of food allowed people to specialize and stratify, creating sophisticated societies utilizing division-of-labor strategies. Other factors then gave developed societies distinct advantages: diversity of livestock, plants, and societal groups allowed diseases to transmutate, exposing populations to diverse ailments that created immunities. The east-west geography of Europe allowed herd and farm technologies to be transplanted efficiently, whereas Africa and the Americas were more north-south oriented and had more diverse climates, a major agricultural hindrance. Areas of high development created diverse societies which, by necessity and opportunity, had to be competitive in their development to survive. All of this is to say that the European continent was the perfect environment to develop empire-worthy civilizations.

A curious and notable example directly confronts the notion that "cultural autonomy" and/or human thought was the primary forces of history. (Indeed, they may even be products of

environment in this argument.) Both the Maori and Moriori peoples of Polynesia were of similar biology and development, separated only by a sea and connected by close ancestry, and yet the Maori decimated and enslaved the Moriori in dramatic conquest. What the Maori had going for them, Diamond argues, was that they had developed a more sophisticated and powerful society because they were able to settle themselves as prosperous farmers and were forced to compete with other societies in close proximity. The Moriori, hunter-gatherers with no near neighbors, were far less sophisticated and did not stand a chance.

Today's popular philosophy tells us that all people are inherently equal, that biological superiority in humans and simply the idea of inherent better-ness are inventions from individuals on the wrong sides of history and morality. The implication of Diamond's argument, however, is that the non-environmental, traditional explanation of history is rooted in the notion that Europeans were better, more developed, with better ideas and technologies consistently conceived by better thinkers for thousands of years. Somehow, if Western ideas were conjured in South America instead of Europe, then South Americans would be the new Europeans, the new beneficiaries of history. This view is inherently racist, for the assumption of European hegemony has a corollary in European superiority.

The politically correct nature of Diamond's theory – a revival of environmental determinism – is appealing for development today. What lessons might Diamond's book have for the under-developed peoples of today? The connotation of the complex causes of societal development he outlines is that humans will develop forward given necessity and opportunity. The implied human equality, described above, is, to me, the most positive sign, because it suggests that people are held back not by themselves but by the environments in which they live, and for better or for worse the contemporary world has unprecedented ability to overcome nature.