

Guns, Germs, and Steel

By Jared Diamond

Read Parts I, II, and III since they contain the main argument. Then pick one chapter from part IV depending on your interests. Each of these illustrates the thesis as it applies to a geographic area: Australia, East Asia, Oceania, Eurasia and the Americas, and Africa. Since not everyone will be interested in the same chapter, you will want to be ready to explain the argument in the one you choose. Finally, read the Epilogue. You'll read about 325 pages. However, many of you will want to read the whole book. That's allowed. ☺

This is one of the most brilliant arguments we've read in a long while, so we know it isn't a dull book. Whether something is dull depends on our attitude rather than on the book most of the time. However, some of you may think so (happens with every book if the audience is large enough), and if you do find it dull, try to figure out why. There are two likely reasons for thinking so, namely, 1) because you don't understand some of the words or parts of the argument or 2) because you think it has nothing to do with your life. This is college level reading, so switch to seeing it as part of the college challenge by looking up words and taking time to follow the arguments and by realizing that the test of personal relevance, while no doubt useful, is about to be replaced by other tests of importance such as statistical importance, relevance to other people and to groups to which you may not belong, etc. Educated people take interest in other people (and peoples), other ideas, other problems, other solutions, other experiences than their own.

The central claim (thesis) of this book is that "history followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples' environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves" (25). How Diamond makes the claim is his argument; how he supports the claim is his evidence. Your job is to discover the reasons why Diamond makes this claim, i.e., you will need to follow his argument and evaluate his evidence. Your job isn't to agree or disagree with him, though if you agree, you will be asked to supply your own reasons and/or evidence, and if you do not, you will be asked to supply counter-arguments and/or evidence. Personal experience and hunches may help you start an argument for or against Diamond, but neither will be sufficient since his own evidence goes far beyond one person's experience.

Notice that Diamond usually gives us the questions he is working on, so you can look for the answer. The Preface begins with the question: "Why did history unfold differently on different continents?" (9). The Prologue begins with Yali's question (p.14), which is the original statement of the question in the Preface. You might try marking your book with a Q next to each question he asks. Note that there are at least two on 15, two on 16 and an implied question on 17 (What are the objections to discussing Yali's question?), and so on. Reviewing a chapter by trying to answer each of the questions that you marked is a wonderful way of checking your understanding (or studying for a test!). Though the questions in the Preface and Prologue may take the whole book to answer, many of the questions in each chapter are answered in that chapter and add a piece to answers for the big questions.

Prologue: Yali's Question

Why do you think Diamond chooses to begin his book with a question? Why do you think Yali's question is relevant for us today?

Diamond proposes his answer to Yali's question: Do you find this persuasive so far? If so, why? If not, what kind of evidence would he have to supply to persuade you?

Part One: From Eden to Cajamarca

Take note of this title. Where is Cajamarca? What is Diamond referring to? What do you expect to learn in this section of the book? Why would Diamond choose to start here?

Chapter One: Up to the Starting Line

Diamond says: “An observer transported back in time to 11,000 B.C. could not have predicted on which continent human societies would develop most quickly, but could have made a strong case for any of the continents.” Why does Diamond begin his story at this point in human history; why not sooner or later?

Chapter Two: A Natural Experiment of History

How does the fact that the Maori defeated the Moriori (a “natural experiment of history”) support Diamond’s argument?

Chapter Three: Collision at Cajamarca

Pizarro defeated the Incan emperor Atahualpa, just like the Maori defeated the Moriori in the previous chapter. Why does Diamond use historical anecdotes to support his argument at this point in the book, rather than some other kind of evidence, like statistics?

Part Two: The Rise and Spread of Food Production

What do you expect to find in this section of the book? Why do you think Diamond chose to write about food?

Chapter Four: Farmer Power

Diamond claims that there is a relationship between farming and societal development. Where does he get the evidence to support this claim? Did humans living at the time create documents (like diaries and newspapers) that survive to this day? In what part of the book does Diamond tell you what his sources of information are?

Chapter Five: History’s Haves and Have-Nots

Some areas of the world developed independent food production more quickly than others. Why should Diamond be concerned with this subject? What relationship does this have to his argument?

Chapter Six: To Farm or not to Farm

Settled agriculture replaced hunting and gathering slowly; the transition was neither immediate, nor obvious. Doesn’t that seem counterintuitive? Why would someone want to continue hunting and gathering when given the choice of settled agriculture?

Chapter Seven: How to Make an Almond

The domestication of plants required years, if not centuries, of trial and error. What is Diamond’s evidence for this?

Chapter Eight: Apples vs. Indians

Independent food production fell far short of a “complete food package” in the eastern United States (until the arrival of crops from other regions), but Diamond does not blame the Indians. Aren’t people responsible for the situations they create? Couldn’t smarter people have created a more complete food package and thereby created a more advanced civilization?

Chapter Nine: Zebras, Unhappy Marriages, and The Anna Karenina Principle

Eurasians – the inhabitants of Europe and Asia – domesticated more animals than other peoples. Why? How does this support’s Diamond’s theory?

Chapter Ten: Spacious Skies and Titled Axes

According to Diamond, agricultural innovations spread more quickly from East to West, along the orientation of Eurasia's axis, than from North to South. Why? What does this have to do with the fates of human societies?

Part Three: From Food To Guns, Germs, and Steel

What do you expect Diamond to tell you in this part of the book? How do you think he will advance his argument?

Chapter Eleven: The Lethal Gift of Livestock

Farmers transmit more powerful germs than hunter-gatherers: Diamond, in this chapter, draws on conclusions that he made in the previous sections. What are they? Do you find him persuasive?

Chapter Twelve: Blueprints and Borrowed Letters

According to Diamond, food production precedes the development of writing. Think back to points that Diamond made earlier in the book: How can he say with any certainty that food must precede writing? Why might not people develop writing earlier?

Chapter Thirteen: Necessity's Mother

According to Diamond, we have some misconceptions about societies develop and use innovations: "Invention actually creates necessity." Do you share these "misconceptions"? Can you think of an example from your own life that disproves Diamond's claim?

Chapter Fourteen: From Egalitarianism to Kleptocracy

What is a kleptocracy? Do you live in a kleptocracy now? Diamond says that societies, as they develop, pass through four stages. How can he make such a generalization about every society?

Part Four: Around the World in Five Chapters

Read at least one chapter from part four. Explain how it supports Diamond's argument.

Epilogue: The Future of Human History as a Science

Diamond returns to Yali's question. Do you think Yali would believe his answer? Do you? In this chapter, Diamond tries to address some objections to his theory (e.g., China, Great Men of History). Does he convince you? Why or why not?

Diamond proposes a "science of human history." What does he hope to learn from looking at history at a science? Looking back at the book, do you think that Diamond is a historian, a geographer, a biologist, an anthropologist, an archaeologist, or a zoologist?