

Sample of a Professional Book Review

Jared Diamond: *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, W.W. Norton & Company, Copyright 1997, 425 pages

Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies richly deserves the 1998 Pulitzer prize for general nonfiction it garnered. A thorough and compelling study of the reasons behind the dominance of select cultures throughout humanity's history, this book written by a professor of physiology at the UCLA School of Medicine is tremendously accessible to the layperson. Diamond, who is also preeminent in the arenas of evolutionary biology and biogeography, presents a straightforward explanation for the diversity of human fates that is soundly supported by information from many fields of scientific inquiry.

Perhaps the most notable feat *Guns, Germs, and Steel* accomplishes is that of providing a far more persuasive explanation for ethnic and racial differences than can racist theories (like the recently controversial *Bell Curve*) of human history. Broad in scope, Diamond's book covers 13,000 years of humanity's past over the entire world. While no single continent or society is covered to its greatest depth, Australia, New Guinea and New Zealand provide the greatest amount of anecdotal illustration, since Diamond spent a number of years in the region engaged in scientific study. Diamond does an admirable job of representing the macrocosm by the microcosm, making his theory of history palatable to the general reader.

How did Eurasians come to conquer Native Americans, Africans and Aboriginal Australians instead of the other way around? The answer, according to Jared Diamond, lies with four basic sets of innate differences in the environments from which different peoples arose. Arguing that food production is critical for a society to feed non-food-producing specialists and a larger population that would have a military advantage of sheer numbers, Diamond illustrates the inequitable distribution of domesticable plants and animals around the world. A second set of factors affected the greatly differing rates of diffusion and migration on the different continents. Eurasia, with its east-west major axis and modest geographical and ecological barriers, saw a far quicker rate of diffusion of domesticated food sources, diseases and technologies than did Africa and the Americas, with their north-south major axes. A third set of factors affected diffusion and migration between continents; the varying degrees of isolation between land masses has greatly affected the diffusion rates. And a fourth set of factors, consisting of differences in area and total population size between the continents, affects the pressure put on societies to adopt and retain innovations, or be subsumed by their neighbors.

The "guns, germs, and steel" of the book's title refer to weapons, diseases, and technologies, whose development and spread are to a great extent dependent on the four sets of factors Diamond summarizes as responsible for history's broadest patterns. At the base of Diamond's pyramidal argument is food production, and he makes a stellar case for history being driven by chance facts of geography, a story of "haves" and "havenots" in terms of suitable environments rather than an indication of genetic superiors and inferiors. Readable and plainspoken, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* will fascinate anyone interested in the history of humans on this peculiar little planet.