

Title—Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies
Author—Jared Diamond
Year—1998

Categories: World History, Environment, Disease

Place: The World

Time: 11,000BCE-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is a world history that falls into the category of attempting to explain the so-called 'rise of the west,' or alternatively, the 'great divergence.' Diamond seeks the answer to why different groups colonized others, in particular he seeks to explain the success of Eurasia when compared to Africa and the Americas. The answer for Diamond lies in the environment. Environment in this context refers almost exclusively to geography. He explicitly rejects any racial arguments to support the differences in societies, arguing that differences among peoples of different continents are due to their different environments, not innate differences between peoples. The title refers to three turning points Diamond identifies that have affected humanity, namely: the invention of guns, the discovery of microorganisms, and the invention of steel. A note that Diamond is not a historian, but rather a professor of physiology who works as an evolutionary biologist. He points to 11,000 BCE as the moment divergences among cultural practices of human populations began.

Essentially, he finds that the spread of European power and colonies can be attributed to a variety of factors, most stemming from their geography: the productive agriculture, presence of horses, the development of diseases that kill other people, the ability to communicate across great distances, the development of firearms, and the formation of centralized governments. Diamond's argument highlights the importance of geography and claims that the same factors that allowed for farming controlled the spread of both technology and centralized forms of governance. To begin, farming permits the existence of far larger population densities than does hunter-gathering because the productivity of the land is diverted towards food production. The development of farming itself hinges on the existence of domesticated plants and animals, which are determined by your environment. Diamond argues that the greatest concentration of wild plants and animals suitable for domestication were in Eurasia. He also notes the geographic distinction between Eurasia and Africa and the Americas, being that the long axis of Eurasia runs east to west matching the major mountain barriers, contrasting with both Africa and the Americas whose mountain barriers run east west while the long axis runs north to south. Larger population densities, caused by farming, also permitted the evolution of epidemic disease. When Eurasians introduced these diseases to new areas, the local populations with no resistance were severely reduced. He also finds that the development of writing required a long period of institutionalized society, developed in a farming context. Finally, Diamond posits that large political units are formed most often by conquest or fear of conquest. The development of the modern world, with its Eurasian cultural dominance, relied on the development of technology, especially steel and firearms, and on the acquired resistance to epidemic diseases.

Key Themes and Concepts

- No evidence to support any racial argument to explain the differences among societies
- Expansion of Europe can be explained by the original distribution of plants and animals suitable for domestication combined with the geographic ease of diffusion of domesticants and their social corollaries
- Disease played a powerful role in the expansion of Eurasia compared to Africa and the Americas