

**Grand Narrative and big questions in *Guns, Germs, and Steel***

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2009

- We saw earlier that history
  - is about what actually happened in the past
  - critically assesses its sources of information
  - tries to explain why things happened, and to draw conclusions from that
- *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond
  - illustrates all those things
    - even though it deals mostly with times before writing
    - so the specific ways in which we have to evaluate sources are different from those most commonly used in history
  - and it deals with the crucial early span of history
    - the “foundations of world civilization” that this course is about
    - that early history set up the conditions of everything that followed
      - the world in which occurred all the more recent history that you are likely to read or study
  - realize that this is a controversial book
    - many people (including me) disagree with parts or all of it
    - but it gives us a lot to talk about
- Notice that I had you read
  - the introductory material first: Preface and Prologue
    - Always good to at least check these
    - often, the author tells you in concise terms exactly what his/her purpose is, and what he/she is going to do
  - then jump straight to the Epilogue (or conclusion, etc.)
    - again, often a good idea
    - often, the author sums up what his/her arguments were
    - makes his/her points
  - then, when you read the body of the book, you have a good idea of where the argument is going, and why each part is relevant
- Jared Diamond was not trained as a historian (nor an archaeologist)
  - he is a biologist with wide-ranging interests
    - you will pick up on his tendency to see the world in materialist, scientific terms
  - still, he is writing like a historian in this book, albeit a slightly odd one
- Diamond starts off by noticing a question about the modern world that needs answering
  - he was working in New Guinea on bird evolution
  - the coastal parts had been in contact with the rest of the world for centuries,
  - while the interior is very mountainous highlands with valleys that held about a million farmers using Neolithic technology
    - who were first contacted by outsiders in the 1920s and 1930s.

- these highland New Guineans had a dense, settled lifestyle
  - intensive agriculture: permanent raised fields in valley bottoms, shifting or swidden agriculture on slopes
  - complex politics and economics structured by individual men (and occasionally women) who gained prestige and influence through skillfully working their political/economic system
  - frequent, serious raids and wars, with many deaths
- after being “discovered” in the 1920s, they were heavily missionized, peripherally involved in WWII, exploited by gold and uranium miners, etc.
- they were very impressed by the “cargo”, especially manufactured goods, that the outsiders seemed to have in endless amounts
- as Diamond points out, highland New Guinea was a complex, dangerous world, and if anything has become more so in the last century
  - the New Guineans who lived and prospered in it were clearly at least as smart and competent as the outsiders
- while they have managed to avoid the worst domination by outside powers, they still illustrate a basic question, asked by Diamond's acquaintance, Yali:
  - why did the outsiders have so much cargo, and the New Guineans did not?
- Diamond expands this question to:
  - why do certain societies from Eurasia, especially Europe, dominate the rest of the world in terms of economics, military power, spreading languages and cultural values, etc.?
- This is, indeed, a huge question.
  - we here (and our cultural relatives in Europe) are privileged to benefit from the most industrialized, wealthy, influential society on Earth
    - in part at the expense of all other societies
    - that provide cheap raw materials, cheap labor
    - live with less wealth or in poverty
    - have to submit to our nations' military and economic pressures
    - see their cultures adopting aspects of ours, but not vice-versa
  - each of us is personally just lucky to have been born into this society, not some other
  - but why is the world so unbalanced?
  - why did our societies, and not others, come out on top so thoroughly and in so many different places and times?
- In fact, this huge question about the modern world really defines the Grand Narrative that Diamond is working with
  - that history is really about the rise of European domination of the rest of the world
    - meaning that he thinks that what really matters is economic and political domination
      - as opposed to many other possible themes that others might see as being important
      - the development of sophisticated philosophies or religions
      - development of art, music, other forms of expression
      - development of science and technology (aside from how it contributes to domination)
      - improvements in health and lifespan
      - the development of democracy, individual freedom, civil rights, gender relations, and so on

- Is this a valid or useful Grand Narrative?
- Jared Diamond's environmental determinism
  - Preface: Why is History Like an Onion?
    - Says his question is: “Why did history unfold differently on different continents?”
    - Claims that societies on different continents already had big differences in social organization by the time that writing appeared
      - and in technology, agriculture, and domesticated animals
      - thus we must look at **prehistory** to understand the differences
      - Eurasian and North African societies had agriculture, domesticated animals, complex social organization, writing, and metal technology much earlier; others developed them later or not at all
    - “the roots of western Eurasian dominance in the modern world lie in the preliterate past before 3,000 B.C.”
      - aha – THIS is really his focus
      - answering “why rates of development differed” is really a way to answer “why do Eurasian societies dominate the world?”
  - Says he is looking for ultimate causes, going back from cause to cause as far as possible
    - proximate cause: the immediate, first-level cause for something
      - the pencil dropped because I let go of it
      - Eurasian societies dominated others because they had the guns, steel weapons, and nasty germs, and others didn't
      - with a proximate cause, you can always reasonably ask “but why?”
        - but why did the pencil drop when you opened your fingers?
        - but why did Eurasian societies have those things, and others did not?
      - that is, proximate causes have less proximate causes
    - ultimate cause: the cause of the proximate causes, the deepest, lowest-level reason why
      - the pencil dropped because of the force of gravity
      - Eurasian societies dominated others because they arose in circumstances that gave them guns, germs, and steel before others had them
      - so Diamond first notes the proximate causes of Eurasian domination, like capitalism, scientific inquiry, technology, steel weapons, nasty germs...
      - but goes on to seek the ultimate causes, that is, why Eurasian societies had these advantages in the first place
  - does that result in a useful explanation?
    - of what?
  - what does the preface title refer to? (why is history like an onion?)
    - it refers to Diamond's plan to keep looking deeper and deeper for the causes of the causes
      - peeling back the proximate causes to find the more ultimate causes underlying them
      - history is like an onion because on the surface, it is just facts and events
      - the facts have proximate causes beneath them, like the next layer of an onion
      - and those proximate causes have more ultimate causes beneath them, like the next layer of an onion

- you can keep asking “why?” and peeling back the layers to more and more ultimate causes
- the point(s)
  - he is going to try to explain why western Eurasian societies dominated the rest of the world
  - with ultimate, not proximate, causes
  - and thus will have to look to times before writing
- Prologue: Yali's Question
  - Why did white people develop so much cargo, and New Guineans did not?
  - this was already set by 1500, so how did the world get to that state?
    - that is, exactly the theme of this course!
  - everyone was a forager at 11,000 years ago, but then Eurasia took the lead in agriculture, herding, metallurgy, and complex political organization
  - so the question really is: why did this development proceed at different rates on different continents?
    - “the broadest pattern of history” p 24
    - such a strong pattern must have an “inexorable” (unstoppable), basic explanation
      - do you agree?
  - rejects idea that different races are inherently different in ability
    - claims that New Guinean people are actually smarter than Europeans
    - selected for intelligence by tough and violent lives
    - and have a richer, less passive childhood development
    - do you agree?
    - does this matter?
  - rejects idea that cold climates stimulate progress, vs. tropical ones
    - ag and complex society developed in a hot region first
    - New World writing arose in tropics
  - rejects idea that river valleys in dry areas were key
    - because irrigation followed, not preceded, complex society
  - rejects Toynbee's challenge and response Grand Theory
    - because he was looking at events too late in the process; the pattern was already set
    - his and other historians' work really addresses different questions, not the big one of continental differences
  - Diamond wants his Grand Theory to replace the popularly prevailing racist one
- point(s)
  - question: why does western Eurasia dominate the world?
  - will explain in terms of environmental ultimate causes
  - in order to replace widespread, popular racist explanations
    - that is a tall order – Diamond thinks he is up to it
    - but it does show a good motivation, a human side to this guy!
- summary of book: “History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples' environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves.” p 25

- this is a form of **environmental determinism**
- which we will look at more carefully next time
- says his subject is history, but his approach is science p 26
  - hmm
- lays out outline of book
  - ch 1: up to 11,000 BC
  - ch 2: Polynesian islands are a small demonstration of the impact of environment on society, technology, etc.
  - ch 3: Pizarro meets Atahualpa: example of how a Eurasian society dominated a non-Eurasian one
    - due to germs
    - horses
    - literacy
    - political organization to build ships, mount expeditions, etc.
    - technology: ships and weapons
  - Part 2: rise and spread of food production: sets up the ultimate causes
  - ch 4: how ag and herding led to Eurasia's advantage
  - ch 5: history of ag
  - ch 6: reasons for shifting from foraging to ag
  - ch 7,8,9: domestication of plants and animals influenced by environmental factors
  - ch 10: rates of spread controlled by E-W vs. N-S axes
  - Part 3: connects the ultimate causes (ag and herding) to the proximate ones (guns, germs, steel, etc.)
  - ch 11: Eurasian germs linked to food production
  - ch 12: writing linked to food production, linked to spread of ideas
  - ch 13: technology linked to specialization linked to food production
  - ch 14: armies, fleets, etc. linked to complex political organization linked to food production
  - ch 15-19: specifics for each continent
- Epilogue: discusses the rest, that history that is NOT explained by this Grand Theory
  - differences within Eurasia
  - role of culture and individuals
  - plea to use scientific methods for history
    - is that realistic?
    - is that anthropology?
  - history has broad patterns that can and should be explained
    - just what Ibn Khaldun wrote in 1370s!
- For next time, read Diamond Epilogue, chapter 2, chapter 3: 50 pgs
- Remember: First and second choices of a primary source due by email Wednesday night at midnight