Foundations of World Civilization: Notes 8

Up to 11,000 BCE: Peopling the world with foragers

- Chapter 1: Up to the Starting Line
  - Diamond sets the stage by discussing how foragers populated the world up to 11,000 BCE (13,000 ya)
    - at that point, the subsistence base, economics, and social organization of people all around the world was relatively similar
    - no societies had any obvious lead on dominating any others
    - but presumably the stage was set for societies in Eurasia to begin acquiring the advantages that led them to dominate the world
  - extremely simplified account of human evolution
    - [does that matter?]
  - "Great Leap Forward" of modern thinking, either in Africa or in multiple regions
    - about 50,000 ya (years ago)
    - no visible change in the bones, but apparently a dramatic change in behavior
    - before: no cave painting, decoration on tools, etc: no art
      - after: lots of carvings, decorations, personal ornaments like necklaces and pendants, cave painting, etc: symbolic activity
      - might be connected to development of language
      - or some basic reorganization of the brain
    - before: best hunting weapons were throwing or stabbing spears, limited number of tool types
      - after: spearthrowers, possibly bows, allowed for safely killing large animals at a distance
      - much wider variety of specific tool types for specific tasks
    - before: only used materials available within a walk of a few hours
      - after: used materials from many days' or weeks' walk away, suggesting either long, planned procurement trips or significant trade with neighbors
    - [whether this really was an abrupt change, or was actually a longer, more gradual process of evolution of more complex symbolic behavior, is highly debated right now]
  - modern-behaving "Cro-Magnons" replaced Neanderthals in Europe
  - Sea travel to Australia, other isolated islands by 40,000 to 35,000 ya
    - implies good boats, modern level of thinking
    - so early Australians and New Guineans were as smart and capable as anyone else at the time
    - why did their descendants fall behind in complexity and power?
  - Australia/New Guinean megafauna extinctions around 35,000 ya
    - caused by humans?
    - Diamond argues that the large animals (megafauna) in Australia evolved without any human threat, thus never evolved defenses against human-like hunters
      - while African and Eurasian animals coevolved with humans, evolving behaviors that helped them survive hunting

    - so the Australian megafauna were defenseless and quickly hunted to extinction
  - whatever the cause, all the large animals except one kind of kangaroo went extinct, leaving Australia with virtually no large animals that people might later domesticate
    - [does it matter to Diamond's argument *why* there were no potentially domesticable animals in Australia?
    - in a sense, no: the lack of these animals would be a cause of slower development of societies in Australia
    - but to Diamond, yes: because he seeks ultimate causes
    - just saying "it happened to turn out that way" is not satisfactory to him
    - so he goes for a clear explanation of why there were no domesticable animals in Australia: they were hunted to extinction by the first humans there
    - but is he going for this story because it is clearly true, or is he just biased towards accepting a simple, ultimate cause?]
- Diamond argues that the New World was initially populated by Clovis hunters, who caused similar megafauna extinctions in North, Central, and South America
  - He is accepting the "Clovis first" model
    - in which the first people to reach the New World were big game hunters
    - they walked across land where the Bering strait is now, when sea level was lower
    - then south along an "ice-free corridor" of mountains in Canada that gave passage through the Pleistocene ice sheets
    - and into North America, following big game
    - hunting with distinctive Clovis style spear points
  - Many sites are known in North America with Clovis style points, generally in the range of 11,250-10,500 cal BCE
    - Clovis points are large, and are thought to have been spearpoints for hunting big game
    - good evidence for this: some are found stuck between the ribs of mammoths
  - But most archaeologists now accept that the Clovis hunters were *not* the first people in temperate North America
    - good evidence for people in South America already by 12,800 BCE or earlier
    - except some die-hard North American "Clovis-first" fans
    - I would say that the debate is actually pretty much over, and "pre-Clovis" won
      - so now we don't know whether big game had anything to do with people spreading throughout the New World
      - or whether this was an adaptation that developed only later
    - the ice-free corridor model also looking weak these days
    - [Personally, I side with many archaeologists who propose an earlier movement of people into North America along the coast; the first arrivals would have been arctic coastal fishing people with boats]
  - Diamond tries to rule out evidence of pre-Clovis people in the New World
  - Diamond cites "Pedro" Furada (actually "Pedra Furada")
    - Diamond is right: these were outrageously early claimed dates, and almost no one other than some Brazilian archaeologists accept them
  - Meadowcroft rock shelter, Pennsylvania
    - earliest levels, disputed by some: c. 13,150 cal BCE

- slightly later levels, very hard to dispute: c. 12,000 cal BCE
- despite early resistance, many people do buy this one as being solidly pre-Clovis
- Monte Verde, southern Chile
  - numerous radiocarbon dates, starting around 12,750 cal BCE
  - Diamond gives no good reason for rejecting this one
  - Monte Verde is now widely accepted as a pre-Clovis site, starting a good 1,500 years before Clovis points were made
- Bottom line:
  - people were widespread in North America by around 11,000 cal BCE (that is, Clovis point users)
  - and some people were here, probably in more limited numbers, one thousand, two thousand, or more years before that
- Diamond asks why so few pre-Clovis sites have been found, given that sites of that age and much older are not rare elsewhere in the world
  - answer: because there were probably not very many pre-Clovis people, and they were only in North America for one or two thousand years before the Clovis horizon
  - population may not have been very large yet
  - in other regions, evidence of humans accumulated for tens of thousands of years before the first pre-Clovis people arrived in North America; naturally there are more known sites
  - why nitpick about Diamond sticking with the Clovis-first model?
    - in a sense, it makes no difference to the main arguments of his book
    - but this is one of those cases I know enough about to see problems with his claims
      - maybe that should make us more cautious about accepting what he says about other things
    - also, heck, this is a history class
      - you ought to get the correct story as we currently see it
- Diamond points out that North American megafaunal extinctions also correlate to human arrival
  - but this is only true if we accept the Clovis-first model, as Diamond does
    - aha—this is why he sticks to Clovis-first.
    - because it allows him to claim more convincingly that the first human immigrants caused the extinctions in North America
    - just like he says they did in Australia
    - is he choosing his “facts” to support easy ultimate causes?
    - this should make us worry that he is biased, not being entirely honest about his claims
  - Another catch: there were few, maybe no, Clovis people in South America
    - so why were there no potentially domesticable animals there?
    - if they were killed off by humans, the South American big game hunters did not leave the same kind of obvious evidence as the North American ones did
- comment: Diamond spends a lot of time arguing for some not really important points
  - like when humans arrived in the New World
  - in order to support a not really important claim, that human hunting is the cause of the lack of potentially domesticable large animals in both Australia and the New World

- and that the ultimate cause of that is that those animals had not evolved together with humans, as the ones in Eurasia had
- I think he does this because these stories fit nicely with his goal of finding ultimate causes in environmental facts and biological processes
  - that is, in processes that seem scientific
- but to do this, he has to choose to reject some archaeological evidence with little reason
  - apparently mostly because he prefers the alternative that fits with his clear-cut story
- this should make us suspicious about
  - how he may be evaluating evidence
  - how he chooses among alternatives in other cases…
- this illustrates that you should assess your sources for biases!
  - biases don't mean the source is necessarily wrong
  - but they alert you to be cautious and critical

- Diamond's conclusion: at 11,000 BC, there was no way to tell which continent would come out ahead… or was there?
  - isn't that we he claims in the rest of the book?
  - no place had an obvious lead
  - but some had conditions that would soon give them an advantage
  - the Old World's head start in population would not have made much difference
    - models suggest that in just 1000 years at reasonable, low growth rates, a few foragers could multiply to fill the whole New World to foraging density
  - it must have been something else about Eurasia that caused the people there to eventually dominate the world
- point(s)
  - up to about 11,000 BC, no continent had an obvious lead in ability to eventually dominate the others
  - but conditions must have been set for some to evolve faster after that
    - like size of their continent
    - topography that allows or restricts interaction
    - extinction of potential domesticated animals, etc.
  - the stage is set for food production to begin first in the most favored part of the world…
  - this is the start of his Grand Narrative of the rise of European societies to global dominance

- So, what were these societies like around 11,000 BCE?
  - at the beginning of Diamond's story
  - when people had expanded into most of the habitable parts of the Earth
  - first, they all had similar subsistence strategies
  - **subsistence** (or **subsistence strategy**)
    - "how people get their groceries"
    - the methods used to get food and other necessities
    - a society's subsistence strategy sets the conditions for many other things about the society, including social organization, economics, many aspects of political organization, etc.
  - all the people on Earth at 11,000 BCE were foragers

- **foraging** = **hunting and gathering**: subsisting on wild plant and animal foods without intentionally interfering with plant or animal reproduction and growth
  - no planting, weeding, irrigating, etc.
  - no herding animals and controlling which animals mate
  - but some foragers do things like burning off grassland to improve the next season's yield of preferred plants
    - so the definition is a little fuzzy at the edges
- Characteristics of foragers (that is, everyone on Earth at 11,000 BCE)
  - often mobile
    - they use up the wild foods near a given camp, then move on
  - typically live in small groups
    - so they don't use up the nearby resources too fast
  - typically have few differences in wealth – no rich and poor
    - because everyone frequently has to carry their possessions to a new camp
    - no one can have very much, so everyone has about the same amount and kinds of possession
  - typically lack powerful leaders
    - no one has more wealth to throw around
    - hard to coerce anyone when they can just walk off and join some other little band
  - mostly organized by kinship
    - **Kinship**, **kinship relations**, **kin relations**: Social relations based on family (genetic, marriage, and adoptive) relationships.
    - Kinship roles and relationships are typically specified with particular words (father, sister, etc.)
    - each relationship has its cultural rules that structure how people interact with each other.
      - A person interacts with her mother in one way, and with her mother-in-law in another.
      - **kinship rules** determine
        - who you are allowed to marry: siblings, no; first cousins, no in some states; more distant: fine
        - who you have to respect, and who you can have a joking relationship with
        - who you have to provide support to, etc.
      - Kinship also provides ways of expressing relationships that are not really biological, such as a chief who is considered to be the "father" of "his" people.
        - this is using a **kinship idiom** (way of speaking) to think about and express these roles
    - Foraging societies are usually organized mostly on the basis of wide networks of kinship.
      - keeping track of many more relatives than most of us do in our society
      - often literally everyone that a forager knows is fitted into the kinship system somehow
  - usually have a simple division of labor
    - **Division of labor**: The ways in which different tasks are distributed among people.
    - may be simple: just by age and/or gender,
      - as in men hunt, women gather, kids play, old people help with less strenuous tasks

- or may be more complex: by abilities, interests, birth, social status, location of residence, or other factors.
- A more complex division of labor implies that
  - there are more different tasks to be performed,
  - that people are more specialized to perform them,
  - and that people are more dependent upon more other people and the system as a whole.
- Foraging societies usually have a simple division of labor based primarily on age and gender.

- usually have little or no social hierarchy
  - **Hierarchy**: An arrangement of things in which there are multiple levels, one higher than the next.
    - A **social hierarchy** might consist of levels of authority
      - such as a hierarchy of workers, managers, and owners
      - or commoners, aristocrats, and royalty
  - usually, a pyramid-shaped organization with many members at the bottom, some at intermediate levels, and just a few at the top levels.
  - An important characteristic of a hierarchy is how many levels it has.
    - Hierarchies with more levels are considered more complex, with finer-grained differences in roles and more complicated ways of functioning.
  - Foraging societies often have little or no social hierarchy.