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BOOK REVIEWS


World History, a relatively new discipline, is increasingly becoming multi-disciplinary. We have progressed from a fixation on Western Civilization (Greece, Rome, the Hebrews) to seeing Eurasia as one interconnected history, and by extension, history as an interconnected global phenomenon.

The focus of history is no longer on a list of kings and conquerors, but is now including merchants, technology, women, and the voices of the once downtrodden. In addition, we are being overwhelmed with recent work in genetics, molecular biology, botany, astronomy, oceanography, and ecology, and the physiology of the brain, which is making us question what we know of good and evil. These new materials are in need of integration into our discipline of human history if we are to get it right. Most important of all are our increasingly provocative findings in pre-history. Life did not start 5,000 years ago.

Interdisciplinary scientist Jared Diamond notes in this ground-breaking new book, that "Native societies of other parts of the world—sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, Island Southeast Asia, Australia, New Guinea, the Pacific Islands—receive only brief treatment .... [and only] after they were discovered and subjugated by western Europeans." History, he notes, should cover the five-million-year period before the emergence of writing in 3,000 BC. This constitutes 99.9% of the human experience.

A major question that plagues historians is why are the western Eurasian societies so disproportionately powerful and innovative? We all know about the rise of capitalism, mercantilism, scientific inquiry, technology, and "nasty germs that killed people of other continents when they came into contact with western Eurasians." "But why," he asks, "did all these ingredients of conquest arise in western Eurasia, and arise elsewhere only to a lesser degree or not at all?"

Racists from the time of Gobineau would like to say that this primacy is due to the superiority of the western European white
race, but Jared Diamond is not about to feed their fantasy. He says instead (I paraphrase), "better to be lucky than good." Those of us with a 13,000 year background of Eurasian and North African ancestors are luckier than the Australian Aborigines and the still primitive New Guinea farmers.

Why were we so lucky? Diamond begins by giving us a whirlwind tour of human evolution and history from our divergence from apes (7 million years ago) until the end of the last Ice Age (13,000 years ago). He traces the spread of our ancestors from their origins in Africa to all the other continents. Some human development got a head start in time over development of others (Eurasia vs. the Americas, for example).

He then traces the effects of continental environments on history over the past 13,000 years. To do this, he had to devise a suitable methodology. He uses the Polynesian experience as a microcosm of all human development because in doing this, he can eliminate genetic differences as causal.

By tracing a single ancestral Polynesian society that spawned within a couple of millennia a range of diverse daughter societies across the Pacific, ranging from hunter-gatherer tribes to proto-empires, he makes a case that their diverse differences in societal development cannot be attributed to genetics. They not only started their colonizing enterprises as a genetically uniform people, but they also had the same plants, pigs, dogs, and tools. Diamond accounts for their enormous societal diversity in the environmental differences of the islands on which they settled. One can only work with what one has, in effect. He further illustrates a frightening thought: that it is possible for a people to lose a technology (agriculture) and to revert to a more primitive state if the conditions so dictate.

The collisions between people from different continents, told through contemporary eyewitness accounts, gives us another window into why one society prevails over another. The proximate factors that enabled Pizarro, with a tiny band of men, to capture and destroy the great Inca Empire, were easy to see: Spanish germs, horses, literacy, political organization, and war technology. Diamond traces how the Spanish came by this advantage—and why the Incas did not conquer Spain instead.

His tracing takes us back to what was probably the most
important piece of environmental luck in human history: the rise and spread of food production, and how unequal this was around the globe. Walking us through the science of plant biology, we see that it was not the fault of the people living in areas other than Eurasia, but the bad luck of what sorts of edible plants and domesticable large animals were available for development. Geography does matter.

The successful food production of Eurasia led to population densities and to accumulation of wealth sufficient to support specialization. Mobility through trade and warfare in Eurasia led to a gradual immunity to a range of diseases. In addition, the exchange and stimulation of so much contact led to the invention of writing, the basis for how ideas and inventions spread and stimulate innovation. Diamond compares the advantages of the Eurasians to the disadvantages in Australia, New Guinea, Black Africa, and the Americas.

"A summary of the last 13,000 years of New World and western Eurasian history makes clear how Europe's conquest of the Americas was merely the culmination of two long and mostly separate historical trajectories. The differences between these trajectories were stamped by continental differences in domesticable plants and animals, germs, times of settlement, orientation of continental axes, and ecological barriers," says Diamond.

Why do we need to know this? What difference does it make? "History," says Diamond, "is not just one damn fact after another." "There really are broad patterns to history, and the search for their explanation is as productive as it is fascinating."

Diamond has been accused of imposing geographic determinism on human history at the expense of the role of individuals (the "great man" theory). We have long been wrestling with nature vs. nurture in our attempts to explain what human beings are and why we are that way, and, of course, neither end of the determinism spectrum tells the whole story. No woman genius, no matter how brilliant and capable of monumental innovations, could have functioned in New Guinea, or Imperial China, Aztec Mexico, or today's Afghanistan because the environment would not permit it.

Although geography (and the culture it sustains) is an overwhelming determinant, Diamond acknowledges how an individ-
ual can have enormous effect on the direction taken by a society. In 16th century China, for example, a single sour Mandarin with inordinate power was able to scuttle a Chinese armada setting out on a voyage of discovery that would have had consequences as great as the voyage of Columbus, at the other end of the Eurasian continent.

This story illustrates the consequences of unlimited political power in a single individual, in comparison with a much more divided power structure in western Europe. Even this difference is influenced by geographic factors. China was able to be unified because of its geographic factors from a very early time, whereas western Europe fragmented after the collapse of Rome (also for geographical as well as societal reasons) and remained fragmented politically.

Columbus could go to a number of different rulers seeking financial support of his voyage, and he needed only one to finance him. In China there was but one power source with no alternatives. Therefore, because of a terrible decision of one man, China was relegated to backwater status for the next four centuries, astonishing in the face of how close China was to an industrial revolution.

It is essential in our now completely global society to understand the hows and whys of human development. We must discard the racist notions of superiority and inferiority, obviously hokum, since the New Guinean headhunter of yesterday is demonstrably capable of literacy, technology, and with education, accomplishments no different from that of the descendent of Eurasian largesse.

If we are to create a rational single world in the future, we must understand why people make war, the structure of tribal mentalities, the competition for food and livelihood, patterns of disease and immunity, and the reasons for certain kinds of governance. We do not live in our heads alone; we are creatures of this earth and its variability, and we are subject to its laws.

Diamond is an unquestionably qualified guide on this whirlwind tour, the base for planning for a global future. His genetic heritage and environment programmed him for linguistics (his mother's career) and medicine (genetics of childhood diseases, his father's career). He studied medicine, languages, history, and
writing, eventually obtaining a Ph.D. in physiology. He has divided his research efforts between molecular physiology and evolutionary biology and biogeography. His work as an evolutionary biologist for the last 33 years has brought him into contact with native peoples in South America, southern Africa, Indonesia, Australia, and much time in New Guinea. "Thus," he says, "what most literate people would consider strange lifestyles of remote prehistory are for me the most vivid part of my life."

Underlying all of his work, however, was the memory of living in Europe from 1958 to 1962, "among European friends whose lives had been brutally traumatized by 20th-century European history." This made him start to think more seriously about how chains of causes operate in history's unfolding.

This work is a bridge, as Diamond notes, connecting us to new information from scientific disciplines seemingly remote from human history. In an age of increasingly narrow academic specialization, we particularly need someone of Diamond's scope to pull these new ideas together.

Laina Farhat-Holzman


In his Preface to *Cultural Pluralism and Psychoanalysis: The Asian and North American Experience*, Alan Roland points out that during the 1970s, "Americans had to become Janus-faced, looking West across the Pacific to Asian societies, and to East across the Atlantic to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Asians assumed a greater presence in the American mind than ever before and it seemed that the global age had clearly arrived."

One of the major reasons for this dramatic Asian presence was "the Immigration Law of 1965 that opened up our shores to large numbers of Asian-Americans. For the most part, those who came were not 'your tired, your poor, your huddled masses..."