Excerpt Page from Jared Diamond
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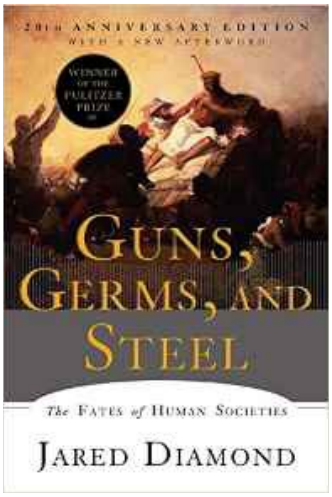
Excerpt from Jared Diamond's Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies *(Norton, 1997). In Acts 17 Paul tells the Athenians that we all come from one ancestor. Diamond offers an historian's antiracist account of the oneness of the human family. Based on available evidence, he examines 13,000 years of human history to answer a question behind racist assumptions about supposed superiority of white (Christian) civilizations. He begins with "Yali's question" (pp.13-14):*



WE ALL KNOW THAT HISTORY HAS PROCEEDED VERY differently for peoples from different parts of the globe. In the 13,000 years since the end of the last Ice Age, some parts of the world developed literate industrial societies with metal tools, other parts developed only nonliterate farming societies, and still others retained societies of hunter-gatherers with stone tools. Those historical inequalities have cast long shadows on the modern world, because the literate societies with metal tools have conquered or exterminated the other societies. While those differences constitute the most basic fact of world history, the reasons for them remain uncertain and controversial. This puzzling question of their origins was posed to me 25 years ago in a simple, personal form.

In July 1972 I was walking along a beach on the tropical island of New Guinea, where as a biologist I study bird evolution. I had already heard about a remarkable local politician named Yali, who was touring the district then. By chance, Yali and I were walking in the same direction on that day, and he overtook me. We walked together for an hour, talking during the whole time.

Yali radiated charisma and energy. His eyes flashed in a mesmerizing way. He talked confidently about himself, but he also asked lots of probing questions and listened intently.

The conversation remained friendly, even though the tension between the two societies that Yali and I represented was familiar to both of us. Two centuries ago, all New Guineans were still "living in the Stone Age." That is, they still used stone tools similar to those superseded in Europe by metal tools thousands of years ago, and they dwelt in villages not organized under any centralized political authority. Whites had arrived, imposed centralized government, and brought material goods whose value New Guineans instantly recognized, ranging from steel axes, matches, and medicines to clothing, soft drinks, and umbrellas. In New Guinea all these goods were referred to collectively as "cargo."

Many of the white colonialists openly despised New Guineans as "primitive." Even the least able of New Guinea's white "masters," as they were still called in 1972, enjoyed a far higher standard of living than New Guineans, higher even than charismatic politicians like Yali. Yet Yali had quizzed lots of whites as he was then quizzing me, and I had quizzed lots of New Guineans. He and I both knew perfectly well that New Guineans are on the average at least as smart as Europeans. All those things must have been on Yali's mind when, with yet another penetrating glance of his flashing eyes, he asked me, "Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?"

Another way of posing the question is, "Why, over the past 500 years, have white people of European ancestry conquered much of the world, primarily peoples of color, and not the other way around? The racist answer is that white people represent a superior race. Diamond offers another answer. After 300+ pages of close argument, Diamond argues that the differences in development behind the past 500 years of history are due primarily to advantages of geography over the previous 10,000 years. Here's the best summary of his answer from the 2003 Afterword (pages 433-34):

My main conclusion was that societies developed differently on different continents because of differences in continental environments, not in human biology. Advanced technology, centralized political organization, and other features of complex societies could emerge only in dense sedentary populations capable of accumulating food surpluses — populations that depended for their food on the rise of agriculture that began around 8,500 B.C. But the domesticable wild plant and animal species essential for that rise of agriculture

were distributed very unevenly over the continents. The most valuable domesticable wild species were concentrated in only nine small areas of the globe, which thus became the earliest homelands of agriculture. The original inhabitants of those homelands thereby gained a head start toward developing guns, germs, and steel. The languages and genes of those homeland inhabitants, as well as their livestock, crops, technologies, and writing systems, became dominant in the ancient and modern world.

To sum up, there are **four** *sets of geographical/continental differences that account for the different rates of development in the last 13,000 years of human history (summarized from pp. 390-92):*

- *First, and by far the most important: continental differences in the wild plant and animal species available as starting materials for agriculture and domestication. So the first two regions that had a huge head start on this are the* **Fertile Crescent** *(the Middle East today) and* **China**. *Even today most forms of grain grown in the world (e.g., the Great Plains of the United States) originated from the Fertile Crescent and China.*
- *Second, factors affecting rates of diffusion and migration (i.e., travel, movement)* within *the continents. The biggest factor is east-west access lines vs. north-south lines, because the former tend to have the same climates, whereas north-south lines (the Americas) tend to have divergent climates. Eurasia has by far the longest east-west access line on earth, from Spain to China.*
- *Third, access or movement* between *continents: some continents are cut-off from others, e.g., the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa (cut-off by the largest desert on earth). For example, now that America is no longer cut-off, grain seeds from the Fertile Crescent are grown on the Great Plains. Indigenous Americans had only corn as easy to domesticate into agriculture.*
- *Fourth, differences in area or total population size. A larger area or population means more potential inventors, more competing societies, more innovations available to adopt — and more pressure to adopt and retain innovations, because societies failing to do so will tend to be eliminated by competing societies. Again, Eurasia has a huge advantage with its east-west line.*

The final question that racist perspectives will raise: why then over the past 500 years have white Europeans conquered the world rather than peoples of the Fertile Crescent or China. First, we need to remember that the largest empires for the 3000 years prior to 1450 were in or adjacent to the Fertile Crescent and China — and that China is currently the second greatest world power. Here's Diamond's answer as to why power moved from the Fertile Crescent into Rome and then Europe:

Fertile Crescent and eastern Mediterranean societies had the misfortune to arise in an ecologically fragile environment. They committed ecological suicide by destroying their own resource base. Power shifted westward as each eastern Mediterranean society in turn undermined itself, beginning with the oldest societies, those in the east (the Fertile Crescent). Northern and western Europe has been spared this fate, not because its inhabitants have been wiser but because they have had the good luck to live in a more robust environment with higher rainfall, in which vegetation regrows quickly. Much of northern and western Europe is still able to support productive intensive agriculture today, 7,000 years after the arrival of food production. In effect, Europe received its crops, livestock, technology, and writing systems from the Fertile Crescent, which then gradually eliminated itself as a major center of power and innovation. (395)

In short, the greed and short-sightedness of authoritarian leaders led to "ecological suicide" in the Fertile Crescent. The empires which sprang up for millennia there abused their land and resources until they became what are today desert regions. Does this sound familiar, given Western European abuse of fossil fuels which currently threatens our own "ecological suicide?"

In other words, we might need the indigenous wisdom that is passed down from former ways of human organization and governance that went along with a hunter-gatherer way of life, living in synch with its environment. We need to be mindful of the whole human family and the best ways from a diversity of human cultures and ways of life. The biblical journey itself represents such a diverse journey, with Jesus the Messiah representing an indigenous critique of the ways of empire. We don't want to give up completely on the achievements of empire that do lead to the flourishing of life. But racism discounts the wisdom of other cultures that can save empire from its tendency to "ecological suicide" — and one might add the "social suicide" that derives from militarism and endless wars.