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Book Review: Jared Diamond. Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999

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Book Review

Will Hamlet

Most historians typically discuss history by focusing on certain events or points in time. That one event or era is typically large enough for historians to dissect for months or even years to become experts on that specific period. Researching large amounts of time is a daunting task, and most historians would consider the thought of covering over 13,000 years of history in one book to be absurd. However, Jared Diamond dared to tackle that endeavor by examining why different cultures followed different courses in history.

Diamond attempted to answer the question of why Europeans conquered the majority of the world. A friend of his from New Guinea, Yali, inspired him when he asked Diamond this question: “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?” (p. 14). While most anthropologists would be quick to point out racial differences, Diamond focused on environmental differences surrounding cultures. He tackled Yali’s question in a four-part answer by discussing the rise of civilizations, the rise and spread of food production, germ exchange through cultural collisions, and why some cultures remained hunter-gatherers while others became food producers. The four parts of the book deliver an interesting take on 13,000 years of history while providing an unbiased assessment of why Europeans subjugated much of the world.

While Diamond did a wonderful job providing an explanation of these four parts in an attempt to answer Yali’s question, his discussion only touched the tip of historical discussion through a scientific approach. He explored “chains of causation” in a scientific manner and described why some cultures dominated the world; however, the book failed to provide the details necessary to be a true history book. Nevertheless, Diamond noted that he intended this book to convince the reader that “history is just not one damned fact after another” (p. 31). While it does succeed in providing a great explanation of cultural differences through an analytical or scientific lens, historical facts have their place—especially when discussing a specific event and why things happened.

Diamond provided wonderful insight into why some cultures dominated others by constantly referring back to factors of science such as the domestication of animals, exposure to germs, and farm production. However, he failed to address the most controversial wild card of history—human thought and ingenuity, and discounted more than 13,000 years of human ingenuity for scientific factors. The ingenuity and thought of humans played a significant role in history throughout those years. Humans created the social, political, and military framework, which affected the scientific factors that Diamond discussed in his book. History identifies the peculiar, and addresses the architecture behind political, legal, social, and religious infrastructure. Human thought and ingenuity play a large role in all of this, and discounting this wild card creates a vast flaw within the book's theory that random chance dealt Europeans all the cards of scientific factors. However, Diamond should be praised for his attempt to bridge disciplinary fields to shed light on thousands of years of history. This book helps to provide students of history with wonderful context that there are also scientific factors that play a part in history.