Book: Guns, Germs And Steel: Book Review

“Guns, Germs, and Steel” is an intriguing and thought-provoking read by Jared Diamond. The scholarly work of Jared Diamond is a highly recommended read as it examines an urgent issue – Why did history unfold differently on different continents. Specifically, why were Europeans the ones dominating the rest of the world? Why are there differences between the income levels of different countries? Traditionally, this has often been responded in terms of genetics differences, a belief that Diamond sets out to refute.

Jared Diamond, a professor of Geography at the University of California, Los Angeles argues that differences in advancement of human societies are ultimately the result, not of racial differences, but of ecological and environmental factors. In his narrative, he meticulously distinguishes between proximate and ultimate factors which led to the disparities between the different parts of the world. He asserts the east-west axis (geographical factor) is an ultimate factor which led to proximate factors such as flourishment in technology and immunities. As a result, places that have such “advantages” became the 'haves' of the world while those that did not became the 'have-nots.' Proximate factors are “immediate causes” to European domination. Ultimate causes are those factors that caused the proximate factors to come into existence.

This book is divided into four parts. For Part 1 of the book, 'From Eden to Cajamarca,' Diamond began to answer the question by briefly explaining the history of human evolution and formulate the framework from which Diamond will develop in the rest of the book. He concurs that by the time the globe was approximately populated by humans, roughly the last 13,000 years, there was an estimated equivalence of circumstances and development for the world's populations. Such approximate equivalence is essential in understanding Diamond’s overall argument as this suggests any populations at that point of time could have initiated the development of equipment for conquest such as gun and steel which led to worldwide domination in later generations. He used several case-studies to illustrate how some people (Maori and Europeans) triumphed over others (the Moriori of the Chatham Islands and Incans). In the meanwhile, Diamond’s main arguments which are geographical factor causes the Europeans domination become noticeable.

Part 2 of the book, titled 'The Rise and Spread of Food Production,' formed the crux of Diamond argument on why societies flourished through agricultural farming rather than nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles. Stabilities of societies increase as they progress from hunting and gathering to cultivating crops and raising domestic animals. This led to the development of division of labor groups and formation of hierarchies in ruling political parties. In this way, populations flourished and empires prosper. Such stability allows for agriculture societies; sedentary farmers with an edge over nomadic hunter-gatherer groups, which wander around and search for good. This is very time-consuming and it was not always very predictable. Thus, agricultural societies can make better use of their time to develop weapons, practice them and use it to dominate others.

Diamond highlights that major portions of the Eurasian area had a natural advantage in the agriculture because plants and animals were domesticated easily. This enabled food surpluses

to develop. This allows them to support large dense populations and crops such as cotton, flax and hemp which can be transformed into clothing, blankets, nets and ropes easily. Animals are also a major source of food, labor and even wool and leather to Eurasians which cushioned them from the effects of the cold. Horses also provide comparative advantages when it comes to wars. Animals such as camels, llamas lessen workload and enable further expeditions.

Diamond postulated the long landmass of the east-west axis as Eurasia's ultimate factor in developing successful and stable societies. People living in favorable geographical areas (east-west axis) could thrive throughout generations because of the access they had .Due to the east-west axis, plant and animal domestication were able to spread at a very fast pace from Fertile Crescent to the rest and North Africa. This is because plants growing in the east side were easily adopted to the fast west due to the similar climate conditions as crops usually have a narrow optimal climatic range. Whereas, in the Americas, landmass were broad on a north-south axis which have dissimilar climate conditions. This causes plants or seeds from the temperate areas to not grow in the tropical zones areas. One such example is Mexico's corn cup. Besides that, geographic boundaries also act as an impediment to progress as it prevented people from trading crops, ideas and even innovations. There are land barriers such as desert and mountains or massive bodies of water. The massive desert between present-day Mexico and the United States averted the spread of knowledge.

Due to the relative ease of trading among Eurasian societies, communication was widespread and information was made available relatively quickly. From there, Eurasian progressed and refined on innovations such as the use of metalworking, wheel, shipbuilding and guns. Their economies fostered as their food production, technologies and populations were expanding rapidly. This allowed them to vanquish more people in more extended areas of the world.

Part 3 of the book titled 'From Food to Guns, Germs, and Steel," discussed effects on Eurasian by staying close, trading in dense populations and having close contact with domesticated animals and plants. This led to Eurasians having greater exposure to stronger germs. Through natural selection, weaker members of early societies got wiped out due to germs, the survivors built natural immunities against them and disseminated the immunities down to future generations. Large sedentary populations can also develop state-based political systems, advanced technologies, and writing.

Diamond concludes Part 4 of the book, 'Around the World in Five Chapters,' by briefly illustrating how his main arguments explain societal development in five areas of the world: Australia and New Guinea, China, Polynesia, the Americas, and Africa.

Diamond's analysis is informative and captivating. His ability to synthesize is exceptional. The main strength of this narrative is Diamond is able to integrate general ideas from different disciplines like history, plant genetics, ecology, anthropology and linguistics to display recurring patterns around the world. The idea from Neolithic Revolution and the location of continents to explain global inequalities was very convincing with well-illustrated historical examples. He portrayed history as a big picture in his very own narrative. Such a bold move is not very popular among professional historians as they have doubts on exploring grounds which they have limited knowledge. It is very encouraging that such big picture history is written by Diamond as his expertise is on evolutionary biology and physiology. This provides a refreshing insight for us, makes us question the importance of environmental factors in shaping human civilization and how these have inevitability lead to the global inequalities.

Besides that, Diamond’s method of approaching history with science is very innovative. This probes us into a new insight of using natural experiments to understand more about the past. In chapter 2 of Diamond’s narrative, he isolates an outcome variable “which is the people who populated Polynesia” and had the same setting for each of his case studies (i.e, the people who colonized the different Polynesian islands have the same culture and genetics characteristics). From the experiment, Diamond can study the impact of an independent variable (geography) on the outcome variable. Diamond will then generalize his findings in Polynesia to the worldwide societies and justify his hypothesis. In this way, it is possible for us to gain some interesting comparative statics that is usually used in natural or social science and apply it to study human history. By exploiting such a natural experiment (Polynesia case study) in a comprehensive way, it will lead to a deeper understanding of the important factors to understand the broader patterns of human history and how is it applicable to the modern world. This also makes such research more scientific.

One weakness of this narrative is that Diamond had hinted very strongly that geographical factors, ignoring other potential factors, determine the course of history and societies. He seems to have largely overlooked factors such as cultural autonomy and institutions which are critical to the formation and advancement of a society. It is highly possible that culture is definitely not an automatic product of environment and should be taken into account when considering the global inequalities. Even though, in the epilogue, he did incorporate some concluding remarks in the salience of culture and included some examples of it but it was very trivial. He mentioned the example of Latin-based typewriters retaining the QWERTY keyboard rather than the adoption of more efficient writing systems which affected their economic progress. However, he did not argue how cultures of violence might differ between individuals and how culture is a potential “proximate” factor of vanquishment. Violence and vanquishment are critical in explaining his main argument and he urged that the use of violence is something that requires deeper understanding. However, concurrently, he seems to presume violence as an exogenous part of human experience. Violence just appeared randomly in his work to validate the formation of states in agricultural societies, an assumption that seems dubious. He did not clearly explain how might violence be linked to culture and even how geographical factors could affect violence.

Another example from chapter 2 of the narrative to demonstrate how Diamond fails to consider culture and human consciousness in shaping the course of history is the obscurity as to why the ancestors of the Moriori separated from New Zealand and form their own society in even tougher conditions. Individual or cultural desire to have an egalitarian living could have influence such decision, this factor is then accelerated by the geography and climate conditions of the Chatham Islands. It is commendable that Diamond makes use of excellent examples to examine the influence of geography. However, it is conspicuous that geography cannot explain every single thing.

One crucial question Diamond’s address in the epilogue is: “Why was it Europe, not China, that emerged to a world leader in the late 15th century since they have comparable geographical advantages?” In my opinion, the reasons Diamond responded to this question do not seem very intuitive. He mentioned that China connectedness which unified China has both positive and negative effects on the advancement of technology. He argued that China’s connectedness is eventually a disadvantage to the development of China as one decision made by a despot to stop innovation could stop it permanently. Besides that, China’s isolation from the rest of Eurasia’s advanced civilization acts as an impediment to China’s trade development. However,

this line of argument seems flawed to me. Diamond did not have a clear set of definitions and explanations to characterize the impediments of geographical advantages to a prosperity of a nation. This might contradict the earlier historical examples he provided to justify his hypothesis. Furthermore, despite Diamond's claims of China as a "gigantic virtual island within a continent", today China is the world's largest exporter of goods and ironically the world's largest steel exporter, while Germany (perhaps the strongest economy in the European Union) is only the third largest exporter. Many countries also choose to export products and services from China for its low trade-cost due to the interconnectedness of China from the globe. Even the United States, who is relatively far from China, remain one of China's largest trading partner. Over the years, China has also made rapid advancement in terms of its innovation and technology. It is a world leader in terms of ICT services such as (Hua Wei) and is also the owners of the world's largest e-commerce website (Taobao).

Considering that this narrative was written from a Western viewpoint, Diamond might have indirectly hinted that Europe's economy will continue to expand due to its access of geographical endowments while China would succumb due to the several reasons listed in the epilogue of the book such as geographical effects on the advancement of technology. However, this is apparently not true in the recent years. China is the world's second largest economy after the United States and has been expanding since the financial crisis in 2008. China's GDP is "6.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2018" while the European Union GDP is only "1.40 percent in the fourth quarter of 2018." This implies that China is one of the rising nations, and it have been catching up rapidly in the frontiers of economic growth.

In my humble opinion, imperfect geography does not limit a country to permanent poverty, the adaptation of efficient and effective institutions can also support countries that are situated in areas with poor climate conditions. It is also possible to make use of big push theory by injecting large in?ows of foreign capital or debt-?nanced government investments to lift developing nations out of poverty. This might not be possible in the short run but improvement is always possible with incremental changes.

This book is an eye-opening read that provide readers with a deeper and richer understanding of the past. Many people who may not be racist in general, nonetheless believe that the only justification for the broad outline of history is that people of European descent must somehow be more intelligent than anyone else, or some fundamental cultural supremacy but this is a position established on ignorance and it can easily debunked once the facts are known and interpreted from a wider perspective. Overall, it is an appealing work whose implications are crucial for human evolution and history.

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