

# More praise for *Guns, Germs, and Steel*

"No scientist brings more experience from the laboratory and field, none thinks more deeply about social issues or addresses them with greater clarity, than Jared Diamond as illustrated by *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. In this remarkably readable book he shows how history and biology can enrich one another to produce a deeper understanding of the human condition."

—Edward O. Wilson, Pellegrino University Professor, Harvard University

"Serious, groundbreaking biological studies of human history only seem to come along once every generation or so. . . . Now Jared Diamond must be added to their select number. . . . Diamond meshes technological mastery with historical sweep, anecdotal delight with broad conceptual vision, and command of sources with creative leaps. No finer work of its kind has been published this year, or for many past."

—Martin Sieff, *Washington Times*

"[Diamond's] masterful synthesis is a refreshingly unconventional history informed by anthropology, behavioral ecology, linguistics, epidemiology, archeology, and technological development."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"[Jared Diamond] is broadly erudite, writes in a style that pleasantly expresses scientific concepts in vernacular American English, and deals almost exclusively in questions that should interest everyone concerned about how humanity has developed. . . . [He] has done us all a great favor by supplying a rock-solid alternative to the racist answer. . . . A wonderfully interesting book." —Alfred W. Crosby, *Los Angeles Times*

"Fascinating and extremely important.... [A] synopsis doesn't do credit to the immense subtlety of this book."

—David Brown, *Washington Post Book World*

"Deserves the attention of anyone concerned with the history of mankind at its most fundamental level. It is an epochal work. Diamond has written

a summary of human history that can be accounted, for the time being, as Darwinian in its authority." —Thomas M. Disch, *New Leader*

"A wonderfully engrossing book. . . . Jared Diamond takes us on an exhilarating world tour of history that makes us rethink all our ideas about ourselves and other peoples and our places in the overall scheme of things." —Christopher Ehret, Professor of African History, UCLA

"Jared Diamond masterfully draws together recent discoveries in fields of inquiry as diverse as archaeology and epidemiology, as he illuminates how and why the human societies of different continents followed widely divergent pathways of development over the past 13,000 years."

—Bruce D. Smith, Director, Archaeobiology Program,  
Smithsonian Institution

"The question, 'Why did human societies have such diverse fates?' has usually received racist answers. Mastering information from many different fields, Jared Diamond convincingly demonstrates that head starts and local conditions can explain much of the course of human history. His impressive account will appeal to a vast readership."

—Luca Cavalli-Sforza, Professor of Genetics, Stanford University

GUNS,

GERMS AND  
STEEL

THE FATES OF HUMAN SOCIETIES

*Jared Diamond*

*W. W. Norton & Company*  
*New York London*

To Esa, Kariniga, Omwai, Paran, Sauakari, Wiwor,  
and all my other New Guinea friends and teachers—  
masters of a difficult environment

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# CONTENTS

<i>Preface to the Paperback Edition</i>	9
PROLOGUE YALI'S QUESTION	
<i>The regionally differing courses of history</i>	13
PART ONE FROM EDEN TO CAJAMARCA	33
CHAPTER 1 UP TO THE STARTING LINE	
<i>What happened on all the continents before 11,000 B.C.</i>	35
CHAPTER 2 A NATURAL EXPERIMENT OF HISTORY	
<i>How geography molded societies on Polynesian islands</i>	53
CHAPTER 3 COLLISION AT CAJAMARCA	
<i>Why the Inca emperor Atahualpa did not capture         King Charles I of Spain</i>	67
PART TWO THE RISE AND SPREAD OF FOOD PRODUCTION	83
CHAPTER 4 FARMER POWER	
<i>The roots of guns, germs, and steel</i>	85

CHAPTER 5 HISTORY'S HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS	
<i>Geographic differences in the onset of food production</i>	93
CHAPTER 6 TO FARM OR NOT TO FARM	
<i>Causes of the spread of food production</i>	104
CHAPTER 7 HOW TO MAKE AN ALMOND	
<i>The unconscious development of ancient crops</i>	114
CHAPTER 8 APPLES OR INDIANS	
<i>Why did peoples of some regions fail to domesticate plants?</i>	131
CHAPTER 9 ZEBRAS, UNHAPPY MARRIAGES, AND THE ANNA KARENINA PRINCIPLE	
<i>Why were most big wild mammal species never domesticated?</i>	157
CHAPTER 10 SPACIOUS SKIES AND TILTED AXES	
<i>Why did food production spread at different rates on different continents?</i>	176
 PART THREE FROM FOOD TO GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL	193
CHAPTER 11 LETHAL GIFT OF LIVESTOCK	
<i>The evolution of germs</i>	195
CHAPTER 12 BLUEPRINTS AND BORROWED LETTERS	
<i>The evolution of writing</i>	115
CHAPTER 13 NECESSITY'S MOTHER	
<i>The evolution of technology</i>	239
CHAPTER 14 FROM EGALITARIANISM TO KLEPTOCRACY	
<i>The evolution of government and religion</i>	165
 PART FOUR AROUND THE WORLD IN FIVE CHAPTERS	293
CHAPTER 15 YALI'S PEOPLE	
<i>The histories of Australia and New Guinea</i>	295

CHAPTER 16	HOW CHINA BECAME CHINESE	
	<i>The history of East Asia</i>	3 2 2
CHAPTER 17	SPEEDBOAT TO POLYNESIA	
	<i>The history of the Austronesian expansion</i>	3 3 4
CHAPTER 18	HEMISPHERES COLLIDING	
	<i>The histories of Eurasia and the Americas compared</i>	3 5 4
CHAPTER 19	HOW AFRICA BECAME BLACK	
	<i>The history of Africa</i>	3 7 6
EPILOGUE	THE FUTURE OF HUMAN	
	HISTORY AS A SCIENCE	4 0 3
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	4 2 7
	<i>Further Readings</i>	4 2 9
	<i>Credits</i>	4 5 9
	<i>Index</i>	4 6 1



P R E F A C E   T O   T H E   P A P E R B A C K   E D I T I O N

# WHY IS WORLD HISTORY LIKE AN ONION?

THIS BOOK ATTEMPTS TO PROVIDE A SHORT HISTORY OF everybody for the last 13,000 years. The question motivating the book is: Why did history unfold differently on different continents? In case this question immediately makes you shudder at the thought that you are about to read a racist treatise, you aren't: as you will see, the answers to the question don't involve human racial differences at all. The book's emphasis is on the search for ultimate explanations, and on pushing back the chain of historical causation as far as possible.

Most books that set out to recount world history concentrate on histories of literate Eurasian and North African societies. 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, mainly as concerns what happened to them very late in their history, after they were discovered and subjugated by western Europeans. Even within Eurasia, much more space gets devoted to the history of western Eurasia than of China, India, Japan, tropical Southeast Asia, and other eastern Eurasian societies. History before the emergence of writing around 3,000 B.C. also receives brief treatment, although it constitutes 99.9% of the five-million-year history of the human species.

Such narrowly focused accounts of world history suffer from three disadvantages. First, increasing numbers of people today are, quite understandably, interested in other societies besides those of western Eurasia. After all, those "other" societies encompass most of the world's population and the vast majority of the world's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic

groups. Some of them already are, and others are becoming, among the world's most powerful economies and political forces.

Second, even for people specifically interested in the shaping of the modern world, a history limited to developments since the emergence of writing cannot provide deep understanding. It is not the case that societies on the different continents were comparable to each other until 3,000 B.C., whereupon western Eurasian societies suddenly developed writing and began for the first time to pull ahead in other respects as well. Instead, already by 3,000 B.C., there were Eurasian and North African societies not only with incipient writing but also with centralized state governments, cities, widespread use of metal tools and weapons, use of domesticated animals for transport and traction and mechanical power, and reliance on agriculture and domestic animals for food. Throughout most or all parts of other continents, none of those things existed at that time; some but not all of them emerged later in parts of the Native Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, but only over the course of the next five millennia; and none of them emerged in Aboriginal Australia. That should already warn us that the roots of western Eurasian dominance in the modern world lie in the preliterate past before 3,000 B.C. (By western Eurasian dominance, I mean the dominance of western Eurasian societies themselves and of the societies that they spawned on other continents.)

Third, a history focused on western Eurasian societies completely bypasses the obvious big question. Why were those societies the ones that became disproportionately powerful and innovative? The usual answers to that question invoke proximate forces, such as the rise of capitalism, mercantilism, scientific inquiry, technology, and nasty germs that killed peoples of other continents when they came into contact with western Eurasians. But why did all those ingredients of conquest arise in western Eurasia, and arise elsewhere only to a lesser degree or not at all?

All those ingredients are just proximate factors, not ultimate explanations. Why didn't capitalism flourish in Native Mexico, mercantilism in sub-Saharan Africa, scientific inquiry in China, advanced technology in Native North America, and nasty germs in Aboriginal Australia? If one responds by invoking idiosyncratic cultural factors—e.g., scientific inquiry supposedly stifled in China by Confucianism but stimulated in western Eurasia by Greek or Judaeo-Christian traditions—then one is continuing to ignore the need for ultimate explanations: why didn't traditions like Confucianism and the Judaeo-Christian ethic instead develop in western