

## **Aug 09 - SUMMARY – Guns, Germs and Steel**

by Jared Diamond

This month we welcomed two new members, Heidi and Janet and saw the return of recent member Cathy. Welcome and it was good to see you again.

It was thrilling to see 16 happy faces at TLBC during a summer month and taking on the “textbook like” tome, *Guns, Germs and Steel*. I admit it. It was stiffer reading that I was up for this summer, but by reading the first six chapters, reading the intro and conclusion of all the other chapters and skimming the text, I made it through the book.

We had a lively discussion with lots of input and comments, which is always so wonderful. I had found a review of the book entitled *The World According to Jared Diamond* by a historian, J.R. McNeill of Georgetown University. You can check out the full review at [www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/34.2/mcneill.html](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/34.2/mcneill.html). Several of our readers had also read other reviews about the book on Google that helped them focus on both the strong and the weak points of the book.

The main praise by McNeill was that he genuinely liked the book and felt that Diamond’s ideas worked in the context of the big picture overview of the topic of how the world became populated and prospered. He did go on to point out major areas of concern, usually when Diamonds’ argument became more specific and his “science” less grounded.

The book was written to answer a question posed by a New Guinean man that I have paraphrased – Why do western cultures have so much stuff as compared to the rest of the world? Mr. Diamond, with degrees in physiology, biophysics and as a professor of geography, answers the question in 425 pages. His gives his position on how the world evolved and why the western cultures were better able and poised to find, acquire, hold on to and hoard stuff.

A quick summary of the main points of the book as to why certain areas/populations were favored over others was based on location and climate of where they began, availability and diversity of food stuffs and the abundance of other resources such as metals. Mr. Diamond feels that his book is based in science and systematically tries to explain his hypothesis. Based on the group discussion, we believe the real answer may be more of an art. McNeill feels the major flaw in the science is his focusing on the primary tenant that dominance was achieved due to the location of the rise of the society and its use of resources. McNeill feels that there are many factors working in cooperation that led to the prominence of the Eurasian Society and it’s perceived dominance over the rest of the globe.

Our group found the book easy to follow (if over flowing with facts at times) and the authors sequential and linear progressions through the emergence of man, the cultivation of crops and domestication of animals, development of technologies, the relative ease of latitudinal over longitudinal expansion, and the conquest and colonization of the continents made sense when read in isolation.

The Fertile Crescent was the preeminent location for the rise of societies from hunter gathering nomads to settled stable societies with crops and domesticated animals. As the societies food sources became more abundant and nutrient rich, the group developed hierarchies of jobs including rulers, priests, artisans and eventually soldiers in addition to the usual farmers and hunters. These societies had higher populations, and with abundant and nutritious food sources, perhaps greater strength and energy to look around and explore.

Because the societies were living in close proximity with their domesticated animals, there was the emergence of diseases. The societies eventually developed immunity to the germs as they continue to prosper and expand.

Technologies such as tools and weapons evolved from stone and wood to metal. Written languages and the structures of government and religion evolved. When the technologies increased to the point of sea going vessels, this is where the title of the book comes into play.

With the development of guns, the use of steel in armament and the germs that these travelers now carried, the technology and the ability was in place to subdue most new cultures they contacted, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The first wave of invasion was from the germs they carried into populations with no immunity. In some locations, the exposure to germs decimated up to 95% of the cultures. Next, the travelers who had the benefit of domesticated animals or animals for transportation (horses, camels, elephants) and superior armor and weapons, were in a position to wow and quickly plunder the “lesser technological” society if they were so inclined.

According to Diamond, in contrast to societies that developed from the abundance in the Fertile Crescent and the other nominally successful areas where plants and animals were domesticated, many societies around the globe were never destined to become global leaders. For example, North America and Australia had no indigenous large mammals that were easy to domesticate. The societies that developed on the Pacific Islands were usually completely dependent on the resource of the island. This is why out of all the Polynesian islands, only Hawaii and New Zealand developed into major traveling cultures.

The main conversation from last night was that while the book explains how these things happened in a convincing way, Mr. Diamond left us wanting to know more about WHY! Why when people began to travel were they sometimes peaceful and traded. At other times while conquering, why did they assimilate instead of decimating (i.e. Inca's?) Finally, why at other times was the main intent of travel to plunder and pillage? (Perhaps we are glad he did not address all these topics in one book as that might have led to 1000 pages instead of 425!)

Most of the readers mentioned that while he was writing as a sociologist, he never mentioned the decision making process that led to conquest. What are the main motivating factors (religion, alliance to a “government”, or greed) that made some cultures aggressive and combative, while others were happy in their isolation and apparently content with the level of prosperity that they had achieved? Is it entitlement, superiority, fear of domination? Why?

There were many holes in our understanding of the topic when we finished the book. Things that the group wanted more information about included the role of religions and cultures (Japan preferring the sword to the gun at first), communication advantages based on location, the benefit of written languages vs. oral traditions. Is the accumulation of stuff an ego thing or is it merely that only established societies with differentiation are able to acquire stuff? Why do cultures that live simply, self-sufficiently and in harmony with nature bring up such a need in western cultures to “educate them to the benefit of stuff?”

Many of us enjoyed the book despite its apparent “limitations” and perhaps to the author's credit, he brought up more questions than he answered. Isn't that what a scientist loves best? To leave us wanting more as there are always other questions to explore? Thank you Mr. Diamond.

## Related books, CD's or UTubes suggested during the meeting

The Last Days of the Incas – Kim MacQuarrie  
History of Food - Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat  
Why is Sex Fun – Jared Diamond  
Infidel - Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Movie – The God's Must Be Crazy

CD and DVD – Guns, Germs and Steel by Jared Diamond

Utube – Collapse lecture by Jared Diamond

*I have sent a message to the San Francisco book club to see if we can exchange book lists.*

## FUTURE MEETINGS

Below is the list of books for the remainder of the year.

Just a reminder - Five copies of the books to be read are ordered and placed at the reserve desk at the Colfax Tattered Cover the month prior to the book discussion. ***Into Africa by Dugard is on reserve at the Colfax Tattered Cover with two copies left as of yesterday. If they are out, I am sure they will order a copy for you ASAP!***

The October book, *The Unheard* by Swiller should be available for pick up at the September meeting.

	<b>Book</b>	<b>by</b>	<b>lead by</b>
Sept 14	Into Africa	Dugard	Sharon
Oct 12	The Unheard	Swiller	Willie **
Nov 9	Baghdad Without Map	Horwitz	Susan order changed at of Aug 10 meeting
Dec 14	Black Wave	Silverwood	Richard

\*\* I WILL BEGIN COLLECTING TITLES FOR CONSIDERATION FOR JAN – MAY 2010 BOOKS AT THE OCTOBER MEETING. **Bring your suggestions and please be ready to give me information including the title, author, country discussed, date of publication, available in print in paperback and also available at the libraries. Voting will be in November and will be posted on my website.**

Having problems finding a book that you would like to lead? Check out [WWW.LONGITUDEBOOKS.COM](http://WWW.LONGITUDEBOOKS.COM). On the site is a map of the world. Highlight a country and check out the list of available books.

## UPCOMING TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS

**THURSDAY, AUG 27** – 6:00–7:30 PM the Budget Treasurers Travel Club at the Ross UHills Library [www.budgettreasurerstravelclub.com](http://www.budgettreasurerstravelclub.com) - This month the presentation will be a panel of returned volunteers to discuss volunteer vacations.

**EVERY TUESDAY** - CHANGES IN LATITUDE - in Boulder offers lectures on various travel topics. [www.cil.com](http://www.cil.com)

*IF YOU COME ACROSS ANY TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS THAT WILL HAPPEN BETWEEN NOW AND THE NEXT MEETING, PLEASE LET ME KNOW AND I WILL FORWARD THEM TO THE GROUP.*

**Thank you for your continued support and interest.**

I look forward to seeing each of you at our next meeting. Until then, travel in safety!

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