Jared Mason Diamond (1937 — ) is an American scientist and author whose work draws from a variety of fields. He is currently a professor of geography and of physiology at UCLA.

His 1997 book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction and the Aventis Prize for Best Science Book. The basic premise of the book is to explain why Eurasian civilizations have survived and conquered others. It refutes the idea that Eurasian dominance is due to intellectual, moral, or genetic superiority.

The following excerpt has been adapted from the original.
History has gone very differently for peoples from different parts of the globe. The last ice age ended 13,000 years ago. Since then, some parts of the world developed **literate industrial societies** with metal tools. Other parts developed only **nonliterate farming societies**. Still others had societies of **hunter-gatherers** with stone tools. Those historical inequalities still influence the modern world because the literate societies with metal tools have conquered or exterminated the other societies.

These differences are the basic facts of world history. But 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 on the tropical island of New Guinea, studying bird evolution. I started talking to a remarkable local politician named Yali, as we walked together.

After a while, Yali began to quiz me.... [H]e 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?”

Yali’s question concerned only the contrasting lifestyles of New Guineans and of European whites, but it points to a larger set of contrasts within the modern world:

Peoples of Eurasian origin dominate the modern world in wealth and power. Other peoples, including most Africans, have defeated European colonialism, but still remain far behind in wealth and power. Still other peoples, such as aboriginals in Australia and the Americas have been dominated and destroyed by European colonialists.

Thus, questions about inequality in the modern world can be reformulated as follows. Why did wealth and power become distributed as they now are, rather than in some other way? For instance, why weren’t Native Americans, Africans, and Aboriginal Australians the ones who dominated and destroyed Europeans and Asians?
Going back to 1500 and further

We can easily push this question back one step. By 1500, peoples on different continents differed greatly in technology and political organization.

Europe, Asia and North Africa were home to metal-equipped states or empires. Two Native American peoples, the Aztecs and the Incas, ruled over empires with stone tools. Parts of sub-Saharan Africa were divided among small states or chiefdoms with iron tools.

Most other peoples — including all those of Australia and New Guinea, many Pacific islands, much of the Americas, and small parts of sub-Saharan Africa — lived as farming tribes or even still as hunter-gatherer bands using stone tools.

Of course, those technological and political differences as of 1500 were the immediate cause of the modern world’s inequalities. Empires with steel weapons were able to conquer or exterminate tribes with weapons of stone and wood. How, though, did the world get to be the way it was in 1500? Once again, we can push this question back one step further.

All peoples on all continents were hunter-gatherers at the end of the last ice age, around 11,000 BCE. Between 11,000 BCE and 1500 CE, technological and political inequalities appeared.

During this time most of Eurasia, the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa developed agriculture, herding, metal-working, and political organization. However, each of these new developments appeared first in Eurasia.

We can now ask this question about the world’s inequalities: Why did human development proceed at such different rates on different continents?

On the one hand, we can look at the proximate explanations, that is, the immediate reasons. These are clear: some peoples developed guns, germs, steel, and political/economic power before others. Some peoples never developed these power factors at all.

On the other hand, the ultimate explanations remain unclear. For example, why did bronze tools appear earlier in Eurasia, later in the New World, and never in Aboriginal Australia? If we can understand the ultimate explanations, we can explain a broader pattern of history.
My book can be summarized in one sentence: “History followed 100 different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples’ environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves.”

This idea has been around for a long time. Many historians don’t like it because they see it as environmental determinism, that is, believing that environment alone determines culture. Yet geography obviously has some effect on history; the open question concerns how much effect, and whether geography can account for history’s broad pattern.

The time is now ripe for a fresh look at these questions, because of new information from various scientific disciplines. Those disciplines include genetics, molecular biology, biogeography, behavioral ecology, linguistics, archaeology; and studies of the histories of technology, writing, and political organization...

The role of food production

Food production — that is, the growing of food by agriculture or herding, instead of the hunting and gathering of wild foods — ultimately led to Eurasians’ triumph over non-Eurasians. But the rise of food production varied around the globe.

Peoples in some parts of the world developed food production independently by themselves. Some other peoples acquired it in prehistoric times from those independent food production centers. Still others neither developed nor acquired food production prehistorically but remained hunter-gatherers until modern times.

How did some areas develop food production on their own? The availability of local wild plants and animals that could be domesticated was a major factor. How did food production then spread? It turns out it was easier to spread along Eurasia’s west-east axis than the north-south axis of the Americas and Africa.

Far more Native Americans and other non-Eurasian peoples were killed by Eurasian germs than by Eurasian guns or steel weapons. Conversely, few lethal germs awaited Europeans in the New World. Why was the germ exchange so unequal? Recent molecular biological studies have linked germs to the rise of food production, in Eurasia much more than in the Americas.
The appearance of writing is also linked to food production. Writing is possibly the most important single invention of the last few thousand years. Only a couple times in history has writing evolved independently. These cases were in areas that were early sites of food production in their regions. We can use the spread of writing to look at another important idea: how does geography affect the spread of ideas and inventions?

The development of writing mirrors the development of technology as a whole. Food production allowed farmers to produce extra food. This food supported specialists in crafts who had time to develop technologies, because they did not have to grow their own food.

Besides supporting scribes and inventors, food production also enabled farmers to support politicians. Mobile bands of hunter-gatherers are relatively equal. But with food production came dense, sedentary populations. These gave rise to chiefs, kings, and bureaucrats. These bureaucracies governed large domains, maintained armies, sent out explorers, and organized wars of conquest.

This book identifies several groups of environmental factors that I believe provide a large part of the answer to Yali’s question.

Perhaps the biggest of these unsolved problems is to establish human history as a historical science, on a par with recognized historical sciences such as evolutionary biology, geology, and climatology. The study of human history does pose real difficulties, but those recognized historical sciences encounter some of the same challenges. Hence the methods developed in some of these other fields may also prove useful in the field of human history. Already, though, I hope to have convinced you, the reader, that history is not “just one damn fact after another,” as a cynic put it. There really are broad patterns to history, and the search for their explanation is as productive as it is fascinating.
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