**In Opposition to Diamond’s Argument**

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In 1997, ten years after calling agriculture [The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race](http://www.livinganthropologically.com/anthropology/agriculture-as-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race/), Jared Diamond came out with [Guns, Germs, and Steel](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393317552/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=0393317552), a landmark book that would win the Pulitzer Prize, become a best-seller, and be filmed by National Geographic for PBS. It is surely the most widely read book about agriculture anyone has ever written.

In 2012-2013 *Guns, Germs and Steel* returned to the fore, first because presidential candidate Mitt Romney cited it on his foreign-policy thinking, and then because Jared Diamond published*The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies*. For more on the Romney-Diamond dust-up, see [Jared Diamond won’t beat Mitt Romney](http://www.livinganthropologically.com/2012/08/04/diamond-romney/) and for anthropological reviews of Diamond’s newest, see [Anthropology on Jared Diamond – The World Until Yesterday](http://anthropologyreport.com/anthropology-jared-diamond-world-until-yesterday/). It also seems that [Jared Diamond has the ear of Bill Gates](http://www.livinganthropologically.com/2013/07/11/bill-gates/)–who considers *Guns, Germs, and Steel* to be the answer to his own big questions.

The key question is whether Diamond’s work is broadly correct about human history or a distortion of that history. I argue below that although Diamond makes interesting points, his work from *Guns, Germs, and Steel* to *Collapse* is a distorting disservice to the real historical record. Diamond’s claim–that the differential success of the world’s nations is due to the accidents of agriculture, except when societies “choose to fail”–not only does not withstand scrutiny, it should not be promoted or taught.

***Guns, Germs, and Steel*: Yali’s Question and Central Thesis**

In *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Diamond purports to answer “Yali’s Question.” Diamond had met Yali in New Guinea in 1972, and Yali asked: “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?” (1997:14). For Diamond, Yali’s question meant trying to explain why Europeans had become imperial powers, wealthy nations, whereas others had not.

Diamond’s answer was that it had nothing to do with any innate European superiority, neither intellectual nor genetic. Rather, it was all about agriculture, a geographical accident. For Diamond, the differences in the agricultural complex that had arisen in the Middle East explained everything. Agriculture had been there longer, giving the Eurasians more time to develop technologies. Eurasian agriculture also included most of the large domesticated animals, which provided a crucial symbiotic resource for agricultural production. Domesticated animals also introduced diseases, and Eurasians developed some immunity to those diseases. Finally, agriculture in Eurasia spread along a longitudinal gradient, making trade and interconnection quicker than in Africa and the Americas, where much more difficult latitudinal gradients had to be overcome.

After once labeling agriculture the [Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race](http://www.livinganthropologically.com/anthropology/agriculture-as-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race/), the idea that European superiority was all based in early agriculture seems curious. However, it was not entirely incongruous: Diamond here did not intend to comment on internal social and sexual inequality, or the ravages of disease and despotism for those who had adopted agriculture. Those factors remained true, but when such societies encountered others, the Europeans had the advantage of disease immunity as well as a longer experience with agriculture and agricultural technologies.

A generous reading of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* could even be that ten years after his “Worst Mistake,” Diamond was now carefully considering the different forms of agriculture that had developed from diverse gathering and hunting societies.

But *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is not about nuance or particularity. It is a one-note riff. Whatever there is to be explained–guns, germs, or steel, as well as writing, military power, and European imperialism–everything is about early adoption of agriculture, the big domestic animals, and the longitudinal gradient facilitating trade and interaction. Diamond has lots of cool stories and anecdotes, but it always goes back to the same factors.

Diamond may be a good counter-argument against some of the more noxious forms of racist superiority and Eurocentrism. He has helped to bring these ideas to a wider public, who may not have otherwise considered large domestic animals and longitudinal trade gradients. But*Guns, Germs, and Steel* is actually “disguised as an attack on racial determinism” (Wilcox,[Marketing Conquest and the Vanishing Indian: An Indigenous Response to Jared Diamond’s Archaeology of the American Southwest](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0521733669/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0521733669" \t "_blank), 2010:122). Diamond’s modest re-telling of traditional domination histories is factually wrong and blatantly misleading.

First, Diamond’s account makes all the factors of European domination a product of a distant and accidental history: “For Diamond, guns and steel were just technologies that happened to fall into the hands of one’s collective ancestors. And, just to make things fair, they only marginally benefited Westerners over their Indigenous foes in the New World because the real conquest was accomplished by other forces floating free in the cosmic lottery–submicroscopic pathogens” (Wilcox 2010:123).

What Diamond glosses over is that just because you have guns and steel does not mean you should use them for colonial and imperial purposes. Or handing out smallpox-infested blankets from sick wards. One of the supposed values of Western civilization is to care for the sick, not to deliberately spread disease. “Pizarro had the capacity and resources to behave with remarkable brutality in the New World. But the mere capacity to behave brutally does not absolve him from having done so” (Errington and Gewertz, [Excusing the Haves and Blaming the Have-Nots in the Telling of History](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0521733669/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0521733669), 2010:340).

Diamond has almost nothing to say about the political decisions made in order to pursue European imperialism, to manufacture steel and guns, and to use disease as a weapon. As a results, accounts like *Guns, Germs, and Steel* end up supplanting the real historical accounts like Eric Wolf’s [Europe and the People Without History](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0520268180/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399349&creativeASIN=0520268180):

Europeans and Americans would never have encountered these supposed bearers of a pristine past if they had not encountered one another, in bloody fact, as Europe reached out to seize the resources and populations of the other continents. (1982:18; and see blog-post [Anthropology is Necessary](http://www.livinganthropologically.com/2011/05/17/anthropology-is-necessary/))

Second, Diamond’s account seriously underplays the alliances with native groups that enabled European forces to conquer and rule. After some initial victories, which Diamond lavishly describes, thousands of natives joined the tiny European garrisons, assisting Hernán Cortés in subduing the Aztec Empire and Francisco Pizarro with the Inka. As David Cahill points out in [Advanced Andeans and Backward Europeans](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0521733669/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0521733669) (2010) there could be no empire without these collaborations and the pre-existing mechanisms these empires had established:

The arrival of the Spanish interlopers suddenly made independence from imperial rule a practical possibility. Accordingly, it was not a small band of gallant conquistadors who conquered the Incas and Aztecs, but an alliance consisting of a core of militarily trained Spaniards together with breakaway, populous states that sought independence from tyrannical overlords. . . .

Diamond overlooks entirely not only the crucial support from non-Incan native allies, but also the overwhelming degree to which any government, Andean or Spanish, depended on a functioning tier of local, regional, and interregional ruling cadres. (Cahill 2010:215,224)

Charles Mann makes a similar point in [1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1400032059/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=1400032059), but it is most forcibly expressed in Matthew Restall’s book [Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0195176111/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=livinganthrop-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=0195176111) (2003). As Restall notes, the decisions to make these alliances and compromises were not necessarily bad ones–some native peoples were able to live their lives in relative peace and autonomy, even after the events of the conquest, which was hardly completed in one fell swoop (for a fuller account, see [Myths of the Spanish Conquest – Indigenous Allies & Politics of Empire](http://www.livinganthropologically.com/2013/02/01/matthew-restall-seven-myths-of-the-spanish-conquest/)).