

Guns, Germs and Steel – Jared Diamond

I was reluctant to read this book because I feared that explaining so much (the history of everybody of the last 13000 years) with so little (geography and natural environment) couldn't bring justice to such a complex subject as the evolution of the human species. I must say that after reading the book I am convinced about the powerful natural mechanisms that shaped our species but my fear that there are other mechanisms of a different kind in play is still there.

First, the author really is convincing in the sense that he uses a lot of research and results to form his theories and at the end of the book you have a nice listing of works that he referred to. He explains clearly why local geography, fauna and flora had such a huge impact on our evolution. Sometimes you will notice some repetition but it is for your own sake: it made it easier to follow. If he would not have done it I would probably complain about his unstructured writing style.

His theories are convincing because they are logic. If you happen to evolve in an environment which contains lot's of plants and animals that you can exploit for human use you will have an advantage on you neighboring human settlements who live in harsher conditions. If you have a healthy diet and a high productivity you can sustain a large population and enable specialization. Your farmers can feed people who do not have to produce their own food giving them time and energy to do many other things such as inventing or providing 'luxury' services and products (producing a snowball effect). Domesticated animals such as cows and horses give a people many other advantages (military for example). A higher interaction between animals and humans makes individuals more resistant to germs, giving them yet another advantage over other human groups.

Although the theories are a bit more complicated then my very short summary of a very short summary of human history, I still feel that there is more in the game that affects human evolution. For example, I remember that Sahlins said in his 'Stone Age Economics' that hunter-gatherers had in fact much free time. They did not have to hunt and forage all day long and had plenty of time to invent things. Diamond would object that (among other counter arguments) they couldn't carry around whatever they would have made or invented so there was no drive to make the 'next step'. Other hunter-gatherers tribes became stationary farmers but they were limited in their potential because of limited available fauna and flora. Occasionally I have the feeling that he over simplifies but for most of the things that come to my mind he has a more or less convincing explanation.

The theories explained in the book are probably enough to explain most of the last 13000 years but since the rise of culture in human societies I assumed that culture would gradually take over the 'forming' role of environmental dependency. In his final chapter the author tries to justify his one-sided approach and mentions that culture could have potential (but minimal) effects on our evolution during this famous period (he also warns about geographic determinism). As culture is a product of the interactions between humans with other humans and/or their natural environment, I find it hard to believe that cultural (and genetic) factors would have no mentionable consequences on our evolution. For example, a tribe that has a more 'atheistic' culture would have specific advantages and disadvantages over a tribe which has a strong religious faith although they share the same kind of environment and domesticated plants/animals (perhaps located on other separate continents). Also, a population developing a different culture would have other selection mechanisms and individuals with genes that favor a certain behavioral or mental condition would be stimulated or countered in that population (depending on their culture). These genes could also be more present in populations living in a specific environment so that we have to conclude, like in most complex mechanisms, the factors of geography, environment, culture and genes are all interrelated and affect each other.

Anyway, I am convinced that the effects of geography on our evolution are the strongest factors and gave many populations a head start but you won't find anything in this book about the cultural and genetic

factors (except for the germs resistance part) that could have had a small but still important effect. The theories that will shape the future of humanity will probably be totally different than the ones discussed in this book. Reading this book convinced me to read Diamond's other interesting book (Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed) but I'm still looking for books that focus more on the cultural aspects of human evolution.