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BOOK REVIEW

Title of the Book	: Guns, Germs and Steel
Author	: Jared Diamond
Publisher	: W. Norton & Company
Year	: 1999
Pages	: 457

PRESENTATION OF THE REVIEW

By Rashmie G. Estino

The Book, GUNS, GERMS and STEEL, by Jared Diamond (W. Norton & Company Inc., 1999), recounts the story of the rise and fall of human societies from different parts of the world. Although the book considers 13, 000 years ago as the beginning of history, the discussion goes beyond that. In fact, the author was able to trace not only the dynamics of civilizations since ancient until the contemporary but also identify the underlying factors responsible for both strength and weakness of people, society and government. He also believed that victory is not destiny but strategy using the resources, material and immaterial, available.

Not common for some historians, the author used biological, political, technological, cultural, geographical and agricultural factors as bases of identifying whether or not societies may thrive or otherwise. Biologically speaking, what has brought some societies to prominence is not solely their human strength nor numbers, but their ability to endure and survive the outbreak of deadly diseases. Politically; the organization of bureaucracy or the unification of different tribes and bands into empires and dynasties solidified the people and strengthened their society. Technologically; early inventions such as canoes, compass, wheels, gunpowder, swords, armors and others give some peoples greater advantages while others languished on matters of sustenance and survival. Culturally, the strong leadership coupled with stern sanctions on administration were paved by unified cultural affiliation and eventually led to the possession of vast territories and peoples. Geographically; some peoples were able to develop more rapidly than others because they live in an environment where access to external adaptation is feasible. According to Diamond, there were two development trends or movements existing at that time: The North-South Axis and the East-West Axis. The latter is more thriving than the former because of easy access to mobilization and friendly climate. And agriculturally; food productions stabilize the living conditions of the people which led them to be able to invent new approaches to improve their lots rather than just focusing on subsistence requirements. Examples of these early societies were found in Western Asia, China, India and America. Europe only followed later on. Hence, the method of the author is not only historical but a combination of several approaches of various disciplines.

The author traces the genesis of human history as well as its diffusion into different continents in particular order. In this book, Africa was identified for having the first group of people to organize society 7 million years ago. Since earlier people were hunter-gatherers, social movement becomes basis of

sustenance and survival. Thereafter, some people migrated to western Asia in 1 million BC, and some went to Europe in 500, 000 BC; others reached Australia through South China between 30, 000 and 40, 000 BC while North and South America were reached between 10, 000 and 12, 000 BC.

The main thesis of the book is that society is more on born than built. What led other people to have such remarkable advancement as far as civilization is concerned is because of their environment rather than endowment. The author identified at least three major factors that can help to categorize different societies in different scales of development: first is the emergence of hunter-gatherers societies in the old world (Mesoamerica, New Guinea, Africa and Amazon) 11, 000 years ago; second is the food production societies in Fertile Crescent, China, India and Southeast Asia 8, 500 years ago; and, third is the emergence of industrial societies in Europe or also known in the history as the new world, happening around 1500 A.D. onward.

The book highlights the three essential elements for civilization advancement. These are production, technology and writing. Productions were divided into food and animal domestications. Food productions replaced hunting as basis of subsistence while animal domestications transformed human activities from family to society. However, not all animals are suited for domestications. The author used the term candidates for those animals qualified to be domesticated. Classifications are based on disposition, time-span, size, relationship and the likes. Together, these productions transformed human society, as income increases, through the creations of bureaucracy, government, military and specialists. Productions fueled these people and sustained their courses of action. In short, division of labor was realized which paved the way for people to discover many things relative to their existence and survival.

Equally important is the invention of technology. Technology is as important as food production. Both are related in essence and history. As mentioned above, food production utilized the resources of each society so that its people can make use of whatever is available. While economic resources developed, technological invention followed and thereby commences the process of societal transformation. The advent of technology did not only ease the way how people do their daily activities but also provided them with extra means to pursue other objectives like expansion and conquest. As technological inventions progress, more discoveries are achieved. According to Diamond, the first Great Leap Forward or the commencement of development occurred 50, 000 years ago and that was the time when the people of East Africa learned to standardize stone-tools. He also cited the example of Europeans making use of technology collected from different societies like gunpowder from Chinese, Compass from the Muslims, canoes from the Incas and among others and thereby easing their way towards more conquest and discovery.

Production and technology are two essential elements that make up a strong society yet they may stop operating without something that can maintain its existence. And this is how writing comes to play its role. According to Diamond, writing was absent from the whole world until the expansions of Islam and of Colonial Europeans begun. The appearance of the first system of writing was achieved in Mesopotamia and Egypt in 3000 B.C. China followed suit in 1300

B.C. and India in 600 B.C. As explained by the author, writing not only improves communication between people but also put into record all their important actions. In addition, writing channels different accounts from one generation to another and provides updates for some events especially for the leaders, soldiers and experts and it thus gives them extra means to make a difference.

Why the title is GUNS, GERMS and STEEL? The author may have a certain view as to how the title should reflect the contents of the book. Diamond did not spend some time to explain the relation. If one, however, is to read deliberately and make some analysis as to the flow of substance, one may find that the order should be GERMS, GUNS and STEEL. Germs should come first. Germs could be interpreted as the discovery, development and expansion of production and domestication as they are essential in building civilization accordingly. Guns are the technology coming successively after the two processes: production and domestication. Soon after, there followed the organization: government, military, bureaucracy and the likes. They could be described as the STEEL because they are strong foundation where societies are built and maintained. However, using many levels of analyses would bring out that the author's arrangement is also correct. One clear explanation is that guns or technologies are important means of acquiring germs. Some societies use technology or guns for expansion and hence able to discover and acquire many germs or ingredients to improve science and technology. In whatever angle, however, the gist of this book is that developing a society requires a revolutionary process. Production, technology and writing must come together. They must be preserved and improved so that civilization will find its way towards betterment.

The three proximate forces such as production, technology and writing or the guns, germs and steel using Diamond's parlance, can make and unmake societies. People and government can survive in any geographical setting as long as they know how to utilize their resources. Conflict exists, however, not because of cultural differences or political dislocation yet it is about intervention feed from hallow vision of world peace. Ancient societies such as Africa, Asia and America were in peace until the Europeans intervene through waves of colonization. America, after gaining independence later on, followed suit. This is in effect creating a perennial problem that the world today suffers and cannot find any remedy. A brief instance show that clash of civilizations is happening because of rule of force (guns); diseases are widespread because of failure and inhumane technological experimentations (germs); and, civil war and revolutions are almost endless because of political intervention (steel).

This Book incorporates many subjects dealing with the evolution of humanity and their environments. Its findings about human history for the past 13, 000 years helped the readers to reason out why and how the fates of human societies differ from one place to another and from one society to another. The historical accounts strengthened with examples; the sociological analysis that breeds political prescription; and the technological evidences which created economic power are all solid bases worth considering for all types of readers. Thus, this book can be recommended to become another extra reference for studying history, development, politics, sociology, science, ecology, biology and economics, leadership and management.