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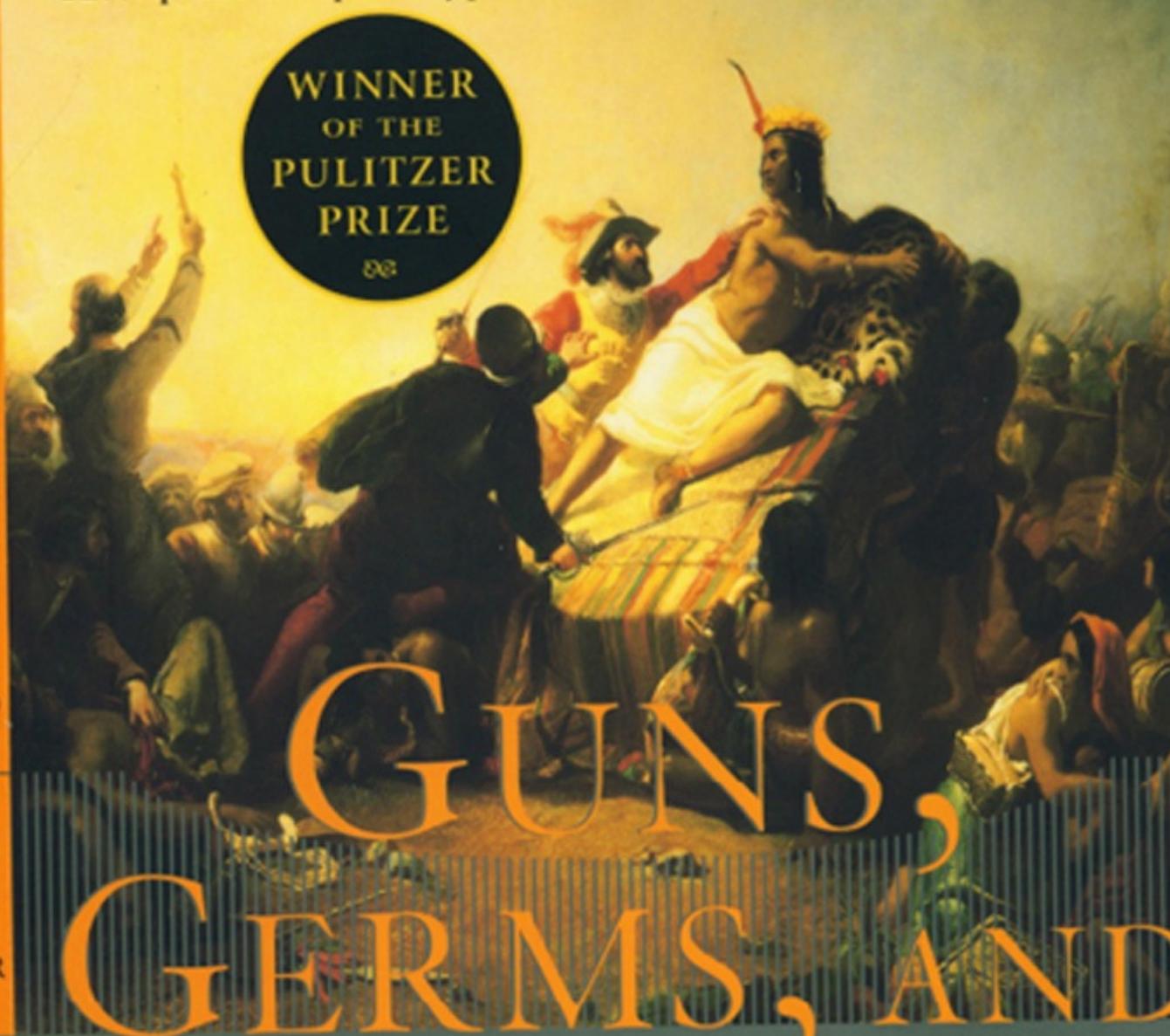
GUNS,  
GERMS,  
AND  
STEEL



JARED  
DIAMOND

NEW YORK  
TIMES  
BESTSELLER

WINNER  
OF THE  
PULITZER  
PRIZE



# GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL

*The FATES of HUMAN SOCIETIES*

JARED DIAMOND

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD ABOUT THE MODERN WORLD

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OF THE  
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**THE FATES OF HUMAN SOCIETIES**

*Jared Diamond*



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*New York London*

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To Esa, Kariniga, Omwai, Paran, Sauakari, Wiwor,  
and all my other New Guinea friends and teachers—  
masters of a difficult environment

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## WHY IS WORLD HISTORY LIKE AN ONION?

**T**HIS BOOK ATTEMPTS TO PROVIDE A SHORT HISTORY OF everybody for the last 13,000 years. The question motivating the book is: Why did history unfold differently on different continents? In case the question immediately makes you shudder at the thought that you are about to read a racist treatise, you aren't: as you will see, the answers to the question don't involve human racial differences at all. The book's emphasis is on the search for ultimate explanations, and on pushing back the chain of historical causation as far as possible.

Most books that set out to recount world history concentrate on histories of literate Eurasian and North African societies. Native societies of other parts of the world—sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, Island Southeast Asia, Australia, New Guinea, the Pacific Islands—receive only brief treatment, mainly as concerns what happened to them very late in their history, after they were discovered and subjugated by western Europeans. Even within Eurasia, much more space gets devoted to the history of western Eurasia than of China, India, Japan, tropical Southeast Asia, and other eastern Eurasian societies. History before the emergence of writing around 3,000 B.C. also receives brief treatment, although it constitutes 99.9% of the five-million-year history of the human species.

Such narrowly focused accounts of world history suffer from three disadvantages. First, increasing numbers of people today are, quite understandably, interested in other societies besides those of western Eurasia. After all, those "other" societies encompass most of the world's population and the vast majority of the world's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. Some of them already are, and others are becoming, among the world's most powerful economies and political forces.

Second, even for people specifically interested in the shaping of the modern world, a history limited to developments since the emergence of writing cannot provide deep understanding. It is not the case that societies on the different continents were comparable to each other until 3,000 B.C., whereupon western Eurasian societies suddenly developed writing and began for the first time to pull ahead in other respects as well. Instead, already by 3,000 B.C., there were Eurasian and North African societies not only with incipient writing but also with centralized state governments, cities, widespread use of metal tools and weapons, use of domesticated animals for transport and traction and mechanical power, and reliance on agriculture and domestic animals for food. Throughout most or all parts of other continents, none of those things existed at that time; some but not all of them emerged later in parts of the Native Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, but only over the course of the next five millennia; and none of them emerged in Aboriginal Australia. That should already warn us that the roots of western Eurasian dominance in the modern world lie in the preliterate past before 3,000 B.C. (By western Eurasian dominance, I mean the dominance of western Eurasian societies themselves and of the societies that they spawned on other continents.)

Third, a history focused on western Eurasian societies completely bypasses the obvious basic question. Why were those societies the ones that became disproportionately powerful and innovative? The usual answers to that question invoke proximate forces, such as the rise of capitalism, mercantilism, scientific inquiry, technology, and nasty germs that killed peoples of other continents.

when they came into contact with western Eurasians. But why did all those ingredients of conquest arise in western Eurasia, and arise elsewhere only to a lesser degree or not at all?

All those ingredients are just proximate factors, not ultimate explanations. Why didn't capitalism flourish in Native Mexico, mercantilism in sub-Saharan Africa, scientific inquiry in China, advanced technology in Native North America, and nasty germs in Aboriginal Australia? If one responds by invoking idiosyncratic cultural factors—e.g., scientific inquiry supposedly stifled in China by Confucianism but stimulated in western Eurasia by Greek or Judaeo-Christian traditions—then one is continuing to ignore the need for ultimate explanations: why didn't traditions like Confucianism and the Judaeo-Christian ethic instead develop in western Eurasia and China, respectively? In addition, one is ignoring the fact that Confucian China was technologically more advanced than western Eurasia until about A.D. 1400.

It is impossible to understand even just western Eurasian societies themselves, if one focuses only on them. The interesting questions concern the distinctions between them and other societies. Answering those questions requires us to understand all those other societies as well, so that western Eurasian societies can be fitted into the broader context.

Some readers may feel that I am going to the opposite extreme from conventional histories, by devoting too little space to western Eurasia at the expense of other parts of the world. I would answer that some other parts of the world are very instructive, because they encompass so many societies and such diverse societies within a small geographical area. Other readers may find themselves agreeing with one reviewer of this book. With mildly critical tongue in cheek, the reviewer wrote that I seem to view world history as an onion, of which the modern world constitutes only the surface, and whose layers are to be peeled back in the search for historical understanding. Yes, world history is indeed such an onion! But that peeling back of the onion's layers is fascinating, challenging—and of overwhelming importance to us today, as we seek to grasp our past's lessons for our future.

J. D.



## YALI'S QUESTION

**WE ALL KNOW THAT HISTORY HAS PROCEEDED VERY DIFFERENTLY** for peoples from different parts of the globe. In the 13,000 years since the end of the last Ice Age, some parts of the world developed literate industrial societies with metal tools, other parts developed only nonliterate farming societies, and still others retained societies of hunter-gatherers with stone tools. Those historical inequalities have cast long shadows on the modern world, because the literate societies with metal tools have conquered and exterminated the other societies. While those differences constitute the most basic fact of world history, the reasons for them remain uncertain and controversial. This puzzling question of the origins was posed to me 25 years ago in a simple, personal form.

In July 1972 I was walking along a beach on the tropical island of New Guinea, where as a biologist I study bird evolution. I had already heard about a remarkable local politician named Yali who was touring the district then. By chance, Yali and I were walking in the same direction on that day, and he overtook me. We walked together for an hour, talking during the whole time.

Yali radiated charisma and energy. His eyes flashed in a mesmerizing way. He talked confidently about himself, but he also asked lots of probing questions and listened intently. Our conversation began with a subject then on every New Guinean's mind—the rapid pace of political development in Papua New Guinea, as Yali's nation is now called, was at that time still administered by Australia as a mandate of the United Nations, but independence was in the air. Yali explained to me his role in getting local people to prepare for self-government.

After a while, Yali turned the conversation and began to quiz me. He had never been outside New Guinea and had not been educated beyond high school, but his curiosity was insatiable. First, I wanted to know about my work on New Guinea birds (including how much I got paid for it). I explained to him how different groups of birds had colonized New Guinea over the course of millions of years. He then asked how the ancestors of his own people had reached New Guinea over the last tens of thousands of years, and how white Europeans had colonized New Guinea within the last 200 years.

The conversation remained friendly, even though the tension between the two societies that Yali and I represented was familiar to both of us. Two centuries ago, all New Guineans were still “living in the Stone Age.” That is, they still used stone tools similar to those superseded in Europe by metal tools thousands of years ago, and they dwelt in villages not organized under any centralized political authority. Whites had arrived, imposed centralized government, and brought material goods whose value New Guineans instantly recognized, ranging from steel axes, matches, and medicines to clothing, soft drinks, and umbrellas. In New Guinea all these goods were referred to collectively as “cargo.”

Many of the white colonialists openly despised New Guineans as “primitive.” Even the least able of New Guinea's white “masters,” as they were still called in 1972, enjoyed a far higher standard of living than New Guineans, higher even than charismatic politicians like Yali. Yet Yali had quizzed lots of whites as he was then quizzing me, and I had quizzed lots of New Guineans. He and I both

knew perfectly well that New Guineans are on the average at least as smart as Europeans. All those things must have been on Yali's mind when, with yet another penetrating glance of his flashing eye he 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?"

It was a simple question that went to the heart of life as Yali experienced it. Yes, there still is a huge difference between the lifestyle of the average New Guinean and that of the average European or American. Comparable differences separate the lifestyles of other peoples of the world as well. Those huge disparities must have potent causes that one might think would be obvious.

Yet Yali's apparently simple question is a difficult one to answer. I didn't have an answer then. Professional historians still disagree about the solution; most are no longer even asking the question. In the years since Yali and I had that conversation, I have studied and written about other aspects of human evolution, history, and language. This book, written twenty-five years later, attempts to answer Yali.

**A**LTHOUGH YALI'S QUESTION concerned only the contrasting lifestyles of New Guineans and European whites, it can be extended to a larger set of contrasts within the modern world. Peoples of Eurasian origin, especially those still living in Europe and eastern Asia, plus those transplanted to North America, dominate the modern world in wealth and power. Other peoples, including most Africans, have thrown off European colonial domination but remain far behind in wealth and power. Still other peoples, such as the aboriginal inhabitants of Australia, the Americas, and southernmost Africa, are no longer even masters of their own lands but have been decimated, subjugated, and in some cases even exterminated 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 decimated, subjugated, or exterminated Europeans and Asians?

We can easily push this question back one step. As of the year A.D. 1500, when European worldwide colonial expansion was just beginning, peoples on different continents already differed greatly in technology and political organization. Much of Europe, Asia, and North Africa was the site of metal-equipped states or empires, some of them on the threshold of industrialization. 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 A.D. 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 A.D. 1500?

Once again, we can easily push this question back one step further, by drawing on written histories and archaeological discoveries. Until the end of the last Ice Age, around 11,000 B.C., all peoples on all continents were still hunter-gatherers. Different rates of development on different continents, from 11,000 B.C. to A.D. 1500, were what led to the technological and political inequalities of A.D. 1500. While Aboriginal Australians and many Native Americans remained hunter-gatherers, most of Eurasia and much of the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa gradually developed agriculture, herding, metallurgy, and complex political organization. Parts of Eurasia, and one area of the

Americas, independently developed writing as well. However, each of these new developments appeared earlier in Eurasia than elsewhere. For instance, the mass production of bronze tools, which was just beginning in the South American Andes in the centuries before A.D. 1500, was already established in parts of Eurasia over 4,000 years earlier. The stone technology of the Tasmanians, who were first encountered by European explorers in A.D. 1642, was simpler than that prevalent in parts of Upper Paleolithic Europe tens of thousands of years earlier.

Thus, we can finally rephrase the question about the modern world's inequalities as follows: why did human development proceed at such different rates on different continents? Those disparate rates constitute history's broadest pattern and my book's subject.

While this book is thus ultimately about history and prehistory, its subject is not of just academic interest but also of overwhelming practical and political importance. The history of interaction among disparate peoples is what shaped the modern world through conquest, epidemics, and genocide. Those collisions created reverberations that have still not died down after many centuries, and that are actively continuing in some of the world's most troubled areas today.

For example, much of Africa is still struggling with its legacies from recent colonialism. In other regions—including much of Central America, Mexico, Peru, New Caledonia, the former Soviet Union, and parts of Indonesia—civil unrest or guerrilla warfare pits still-numerous indigenous populations against governments dominated by descendants of invading conquerors. Many other indigenous populations—such as native Hawaiians, Aboriginal Australians, native Siberians, and Indians in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile—became so reduced in numbers by genocide and disease that they are now greatly outnumbered by the descendants of invaders. Although they are incapable of mounting a civil war, they are nevertheless increasingly asserting their rights.

In addition to these current political and economic reverberations of past collisions among peoples, there are current linguistic reverberations—especially the impending disappearance of many of the modern world's 6,000 surviving languages, becoming replaced by English, Chinese, Russian, and a few other languages whose numbers of speakers have increased enormously in recent centuries. All these problems of the modern world result from the different historical trajectories implicit in Yali's question.

**B**EFORE SEEKING ANSWERS to Yali's question, we should pause to consider some objections to discussing it at all. Some people take offense at the mere posing of the question, for several reasons.

One objection goes as follows. If we succeed in explaining how some people came to dominate other people, may this not seem to justify the domination? Doesn't it seem to say that the outcome was inevitable, and that it would therefore be futile to try to change the outcome today? This objection rests on a common tendency to confuse an explanation of causes with a justification or acceptance of results. What use one makes of a historical explanation is a question separate from the explanation itself. Understanding is more often used to try to alter an outcome than to repeat or perpetuate it. That's why psychologists try to understand the minds of murderers and rapists, why social historians try to understand genocide, and why physicians try to understand the causes of human disease. Those investigators do not seek to justify murder, rape, genocide, and illness. Instead, they seek to use their understanding of a chain of causes to interrupt the chain.

Second, doesn't addressing Yali's question automatically involve a Eurocentric approach to history, a glorification of western Europeans, and an obsession with the prominence of western Europe and Europeanized America in the modern world? Isn't that prominence just an ephemeral phenomenon of the last few centuries, now fading behind the prominence of Japan and Southeast

Asia? In fact, most of this book will deal with peoples other than Europeans. Rather than focus solely on interactions between Europeans and non-Europeans, we shall also examine interactions between different non-European peoples—especially those that took place within sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and New Guinea, among peoples native to those areas. Far from glorifying peoples of western European origin, we shall see that most basic elements of their civilization were developed by other peoples living elsewhere and were then imported to western Europe.

Third, don't words such as "civilization," and phrases such as "rise of civilization," convey the false impression that civilization is good, tribal hunter-gatherers are miserable, and history for the past 13,000 years has involved progress toward greater human happiness? In fact, I do not assume that industrialized states are "better" than hunter-gatherer tribes, or that the abandonment of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle for iron-based statehood represents "progress," or that it has led to an increase in human happiness. My own impression, from having divided my life between United States cities and New Guinea villages, is that the so-called blessings of civilization are mixed. For example, compared with hunter-gatherers, citizens of modern industrialized states enjoy better medical care, lower risk of death by homicide, and a longer life span, but receive much less social support from friendships and extended families. My motive for investigating these geographic differences in human societies is not to celebrate one type of society over another but simply to understand what happened in history.

**D**OES YALP'S QUESTION really need another book to answer it? Don't we already know the answer? If so, what is it?

Probably the commonest explanation involves implicitly or explicitly assuming biologic differences among peoples. In the centuries after A.D. 1500, as European explorers became aware of the wide differences among the world's peoples in technology and political organization, they assumed that those differences arose from differences in innate ability. With the rise of Darwinian theory, explanations were recast in terms of natural selection and of evolutionary descent. Technologically primitive peoples were considered evolutionary vestiges of human descent from apelike ancestors. The displacement of such peoples by colonists from industrialized societies exemplified the survival of the fittest. With the later rise of genetics, the explanations were recast once again, in genetic terms. Europeans became considered genetically more intelligent than Africans and especially more so than Aboriginal Australians.

Today, segments of Western society publicly repudiate racism. Yet many (perhaps most) Westerners continue to accept racist explanations privately or subconsciously. In Japan and many other countries, such explanations are still advanced publicly and without apology. Even educated white Americans, Europeans, and Australians, when the subject of Australian Aborigines comes up, assume that there is something primitive about the Aborigines themselves. They certainly look different from whites. Many of the living descendants of those Aborigines who survived the era of European colonization are now finding it difficult to succeed economically in white Australian society.

A seemingly compelling argument goes as follows. White immigrants to Australia built a literate, industrialized, politically centralized, democratic state based on metal tools and on food production, all within a century of colonizing a continent where the Aborigines had been living as tribal hunter-gatherers without metal for at least 40,000 years. Here were two successive experiments in human development, in which the environment was identical and the sole variable was the people occupying that environment. What further proof could be wanted to establish that the differences between Aboriginal Australian and European societies arose from differences between the people

themselves?

~~The objection to such racist explanations is not just that they are loathsome, but also that they are wrong. Sound evidence for the existence of human differences in intelligence that parallel human differences in technology is lacking. In fact, as I shall explain in a moment, modern “Stone Age” peoples are on the average probably more intelligent, not less intelligent, than industrialized peoples. Paradoxical as it may sound, we shall see in Chapter 15 that white immigrants to Australia do not deserve the credit usually accorded to them for building a literate industrialized society with the other virtues mentioned above. In addition, peoples who until recently were technologically primitive—such as Aboriginal Australians and New Guineans—routinely master industrial technologies when given opportunities to do so.~~

An enormous effort by cognitive psychologists has gone into the search for differences in IQ between peoples of different geographic origins now living in the same country. In particular, numerous white American psychologists have been trying for decades to demonstrate that black Americans of African origins are innately less intelligent than white Americans of European origin. However, as is well known, the peoples compared differ greatly in their social environment and educational opportunities. This fact creates double difficulties for efforts to test the hypothesis that intellectual differences underlie technological differences. First, even our cognitive abilities as adults are heavily influenced by the social environment that we experienced during childhood, making it hard to discern any influence of preexisting genetic differences. Second, tests of cognitive ability (like IQ tests) tend to measure cultural learning and not pure innate intelligence, whatever that is. Because of those undoubted effects of childhood environment and learned knowledge on IQ test results, the psychologists’ efforts to date have not succeeded in convincingly establishing the postulated genetic deficiency in IQs of nonwhite peoples.

My perspective on this controversy comes from 33 years of working with New Guineans in their own intact societies. From the very beginning of my work with New Guineans, they impressed me as being on the average more intelligent, more alert, more expressive, and more interested in things around them than the average European or American is. At some tasks that one might reasonably suppose to reflect aspects of brain function, such as the ability to form a mental map of unfamiliar surroundings, they appear considerably more adept than Westerners. Of course, New Guineans tend to perform poorly at tasks that Westerners have been trained to perform since childhood and that New Guineans have not. Hence when unschooled New Guineans from remote villages visit towns, they look stupid to Westerners. Conversely, I am constantly aware of how stupid I look to New Guineans when I’m with them in the jungle, displaying my incompetence at simple tasks (such as following a jungle trail or erecting a shelter) at which New Guineans have been trained since childhood and I have not.

It’s easy to recognize two reasons why my impression that New Guineans are smarter than Westerners may be correct. First, Europeans have for thousands of years been living in densely populated societies with central governments, police, and judiciaries. In those societies, infectious epidemic diseases of dense populations (such as smallpox) were historically the major cause of death while murders were relatively uncommon and a state of war was the exception rather than the rule. Most Europeans who escaped fatal infections also escaped other potential causes of death and proceeded to pass on their genes. Today, most live-born Western infants survive fatal infections as well and reproduce themselves, regardless of their intelligence and the genes they bear. In contrast, New Guineans have been living in societies where human numbers were too low for epidemic diseases of dense populations to evolve. Instead, traditional New Guineans suffered high mortality from murder, chronic tribal warfare, accidents, and problems in procuring food.

Intelligent people are likelier than less intelligent ones to escape those causes of high mortality

in traditional New Guinea societies. However, the differential mortality from epidemic diseases in traditional European societies had little to do with intelligence, and instead involved genetic resistance dependent on details of body chemistry. For example, people with blood group B or O have a greater resistance to smallpox than do people with blood group A. That is, natural selection promoting genes for intelligence has probably been far more ruthless in New Guinea than in more densely populated, politically complex societies, where natural selection for body chemistry was instead more potent.

Besides this genetic reason, there is also a second reason why New Guineans may have come to be smarter than Westerners. Modern European and American children spend much of their time being passively entertained by television, radio, and movies. In the average American household, the TV set is on for seven hours per day. In contrast, traditional New Guinea children have virtually no such opportunities for passive entertainment and instead spend almost all of their waking hours actively doing something, such as talking or playing with other children or adults. Almost all studies of child development emphasize the role of childhood stimulation and activity in promoting mental development, and stress the irreversible mental stunting associated with reduced childhood stimulation. This effect surely contributes a non-genetic component to the superior average mental function displayed by New Guineans.

That is, in mental ability New Guineans are probably genetically superior to Westerners, and they surely are superior in escaping the devastating developmental disadvantages under which most children in industrialized societies now grow up. Certainly, there is no hint at all of any intellectual disadvantage of New Guineans that could serve to answer Yali's question. The same two genetic and childhood developmental factors are likely to distinguish not only New Guineans from Westerners but also hunter-gatherers and other members of technologically primitive societies from members of technologically advanced societies in general. Thus, the usual racist assumption has to be turned on its head. Why is it that Europeans, despite their likely genetic disadvantage and (in modern times) the undoubtedly developmental disadvantage, ended up with much more of the cargo? Why did New Guineans wind up technologically primitive, despite what I believe to be their superior intelligence?

**A** GENETIC EXPLANATION isn't the only possible answer to Yali's question. Another one, popular with inhabitants of northern Europe, invokes the supposed stimulatory effects of their homeland's cool climate and the inhibitory effects of hot, humid, tropical climates on human creativity and energy. Perhaps the seasonally variable climate at high latitudes poses more diverse challenges than does the seasonally constant tropical climate. Perhaps cold climates require one to be more technologically inventive to survive, because one must build a warm home and make warm clothing, whereas one can survive in the tropics with simpler housing and no clothing. Or the argument can be reversed to reach the same conclusion: the long winters at high latitudes leave people with much time in which to stay indoors and invent.

Although formerly popular, this type of explanation, too, fails to survive scrutiny. As we shall see, the peoples of northern Europe contributed nothing of fundamental importance to Eurasian civilization until the last thousand years; they simply had the good luck to live at a geographical location where they were likely to receive advances (such as agriculture, wheels, writing, and metallurgy) developed in warmer parts of Eurasia. In the New World the cold regions at high latitudes were even more of a human backwater. The sole Native American societies to develop writing arose in Mexico south of the Tropic of Cancer; the oldest New World pottery comes from near the equator in tropical South America; and the New World society generally considered the most advanced in an

astronomy, and other respects was the Classic Maya society of the tropical Yucatán and Guatemala in the first millennium A.D.

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Still a third type of answer to Yali invokes the supposed importance of lowland river valleys in dry climates, where highly productive agriculture depended on large-scale irrigation systems that in turn required centralized bureaucracies. This explanation was suggested by the undoubted fact that the earliest known empires and writing systems arose in the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys of the Fertile Crescent and in the Nile Valley of Egypt. Water control systems also appear to have been associated with centralized political organization in some other areas of the world, including the Indus Valley of the Indian subcontinent, the Yellow and Yangtze Valleys of China, the Maya lowlands of Mesoamerica, and the coastal desert of Peru.

However, detailed archaeological studies have shown that complex irrigation systems did not *accompany* the rise of centralized bureaucracies but *followed* after a considerable lag. That is, political centralization arose for some other reason and then permitted construction of complex irrigation systems. None of the crucial developments preceding political centralization in those same parts of the world were associated with river valleys or with complex irrigation systems. For example, in the Fertile Crescent food production and village life originated in hills and mountains, not in lowland river valleys. The Nile Valley remained a cultural backwater for about 3,000 years after village food production began to flourish in the hills of the Fertile Crescent. River valleys of the southwestern United States eventually came to support irrigation agriculture and complex societies, but only after many of the developments on which those societies rested had been imported from Mexico. The river valleys of southeastern Australia remained occupied by tribal societies without agriculture.

Yet another type of explanation lists the immediate factors that enabled Europeans to kill and conquer other peoples—especially European guns, infectious diseases, steel tools, and manufactured products. Such an explanation is on the right track, as those factors demonstrably *were* directly responsible for European conquests. However, this hypothesis is incomplete, because it still offers only a proximate (first-stage) explanation identifying immediate causes. It invites a search for ultimate causes: why were Europeans, rather than Africans or Native Americans, the ones to end up with guns, the nastiest germs, and steel?

While some progress has been made in identifying those ultimate causes in the case of European conquest of the New World, Africa remains a big puzzle. Africa is the continent where protohumans evolved for the longest time, where anatomically modern humans may also have arisen, and where native diseases like malaria and yellow fever killed European explorers. If a long head start counts for anything, why didn't guns and steel arise first in Africa, permitting Africans and their germs to conquer Europe? And what accounts for the failure of Aboriginal Australians to pass beyond the stage of hunter-gatherers with stone tools?

Questions that emerge from worldwide comparisons of human societies formerly attracted much attention from historians and geographers. The best-known modern example of such an effort was Arnold Toynbee's 12-volume *Study of History*. Toynbee was especially interested in the international dynamics of 23 advanced civilizations, of which 22 were literate and 19 were Eurasian. He was less interested in prehistory and in simpler, nonliterate societies. Yet the roots of inequality in the modern world lie far back in prehistory. Hence Toynbee did not pose Yali's question, nor did he come to grips with what I see as history's broadest pattern. Other available books on world history similarly tend to focus on advanced literate Eurasian civilizations of the last 5,000 years; they have a very brief treatment of pre-Columbian Native American civilizations, and an even briefer discussion of the rest of the world except for its recent interactions with Eurasian civilizations. Since Toynbee's attempt at worldwide syntheses of historical causation have fallen into disfavor among most historians, as posing an apparently intractable problem.

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