

Power and Responsibility

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In his book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond describes, in brilliant detail, the history and evolution of man in different areas of the world. The book is organized as an answer to a fundamental question posed to him in the early days of his career as an evolutionary biologist in New Guinea. A New Guinean politician by the name of Yali asked Diamond why the Europeans, who had colonized the area, possessed so much more “cargo” than the native inhabitants of New Guinea (14). By cargo Yali meant material possessions. However, the question demands a much more in-depth answer than the question implies. Throughout his book, Diamond strives to answer why people of some areas developed certain technologies and complex cultures faster than people of other areas, and why some never developed these advantages at all. Diamond explains that the reason that some people have advanced further than others is due to numerous factors that are unrelated to the person’s physiology. After reading Diamond’s book, I began to understand the factors underlying various differences of people the world over. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* has not only influenced my way of thinking, but it has also impressed upon me the need to answer a question of my own: Is it justifiable for a group of people who possess seemingly superior aspects of culture to impose their will on less advanced people of the Earth or on the Earth itself? Throughout the following paper I will attempt, while summarizing Diamond’s work, to prove that simply possessing the capabilities to commit an act does not necessarily warrant its justification, for the perpetration of such an act would surely result in negative consequences for all parties involved.

Diamond cites many examples of one group of people exerting dominance over another group because they possess certain advantages in technology. He explains that in many instances the dominant group actually felt as if they were superior to the weaker group, in all aspects of life. However, as he goes on to demonstrate, the factors which initially contributed to the advancement of the dominant group are, in most part, coincidental. Several of the major determinants of advancement and dominance that Diamond cites are, food production, germs, technology, and political organization, with food production being the most important because of the chain-reactions it causes. As Diamond reveals, “food production was indirectly a prerequisite for the development of guns, germs, and steel” and, in fact, “led to the proximate causes of germs, literacy, technology, and centralized government” (86 and 195). This is because farming demands that people live more of a sedentary lifestyle. Diamond explains this created an excellent breeding ground for germs and states that “farmers are sedentary and live amid their own sewage, thus providing microbes with a short path from one person’s body into another’s drinking water” (205). The sedentary lifestyle, coupled with an increased availability in food, lead to an increase in population, and he explains it is this population increase which provided an increase in probability that inventions would arise as well as a need for advanced political organization (111 and 407). Such examples illustrate how the single innovation of food production caused a technological snowball effect, which impacted many aspects of life within ancient cultures. However, there are several factors underlying the possession and availability of these determinants of advancement.

As Diamond reveals, diffusion of technology was a major determinant of which people would profit from such advancements. Therefore, the isolation of a group of people by ecological or geographical barriers is in effect an essential factor underlying the primitive state of many

people because different geographical areas are more conducive than others to diffusion, which directly affects the development of the aforementioned determinants of advancement (Diamond 238 and 261). With the example of writing, Diamond states that “With the possible exceptions of the Egyptian, Chinese, and Easter Island writing systems to be considered later, all other writing systems devised anywhere in the world, at any time, appear to have been descendants of systems modified from or at least inspired by Sumerian or early Mesoamerican writing” (224). Therefore, all known systems of writing today are simply evolutions of only a few original centers of writing, whose initial innovation spread into other accessible areas of the world. Another example are the world’s first food producers who, according to Diamond, originated in the fertile crescent, an area which possessed numerous varieties of wild grasses available for cultivation, as well as an ideal environment for the production of said grasses (124). At the other end of the spectrum are the Aboriginal Australians, who possessed very few available wild plants, lived in a very unpredictable climatic environment, and are, historically, one of the most isolated groups on Earth (Diamond 302 and 316). Also, as was the case with writing, food production, instead of being developed independently by all cultures, was adopted by most groups from a few original developers located in various areas of the earth. With this in mind, it is easy to see how an isolated culture with such disadvantages would be less advanced today.

Throughout reading *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the impression I received in respect to the reasons for advancement of certain groups around the world seemed to be no more than mere coincidence. This is because, as Diamond explains, that it is not any superior inherent trait in an individual which allows him, instead of someone else, to possess the determinants of advancement mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Instead, as I mentioned, it is in large part a matter of chance. As was seen with food production, which “evolved as a by-product of

decisions made without awareness of their consequences,” it was often favorable circumstances rather than superior intellect which caused people to possess an advantage over others. (106). In response to my original query, since the technologically advanced people of the world became that way because of initial happenstance and not because of any superior aspect of physiology, it therefore seems absurd that they should feel that they have the right to impose their dominance onto anyone else. However, if the aforementioned evidence is not convincing enough, there are always the effects of one’s actions to consider.

With power comes responsibility. Regardless of the processes by which a group of people becomes dominant, they still must be held accountable for their actions. Every action causes a reaction, and in that sense many more lives are negatively affected by an irresponsible use of power than may be initially anticipated. In this respect, a single act of irresponsibility can cause a negative chain of reactions which can severely upset many peoples lives, as well as the natural balance of the environment. Throughout history, many atrocities have been committed by people believing themselves superior to others. It could be stated that these people lived in ignorance of their actions and, in effect, knew not what they were doing. Therefore, I will mention a few relatively modern effects of a dominant group of people acting irresponsibly. The well-publicized issue of apartheid in South Africa demonstrates the effect a dominant group acting irresponsibly can have. It has been cited that under apartheid whites controlled every aspect of the country’s government, military, and police, even though there “were 4.7 non-Whites for every White” (Haviland 471). Also, it is interesting to see that “the richest 20% of South Africa took 58% of the country’s income and enjoyed a higher standard of living, while the poorest 40% of the population received but 6.2% of the national product” (Haviland 471). It has been witnessed that even after apartheid was ended the figures remained much the same. This shows

that it is extremely difficult to amend the effects of one group of people imposing their cultural dominance upon another. It should not be expected for the South Africans to adapt, in a few years, a culture whose evolution took thousands of years to develop. That situation, as can be seen by South Africa's death rate, has negatively affected everyone. In addition to culturally disadvantaged humans being affected by the carelessness of the world's elite, the environment is also a victim.

In his book, *How Much is Enough*, Alan Durning cites the numerous negative effects the consumer society is having on the environment. He states that the consumer class, through an imbalance of its give-and-take relationship with the rest of the world, is killing the planet, as well as itself. Basically, the production and disposal process of the amenities which the people of Earth hold so dear will eventually kill them if not amended (Durning 60). The imbalance can be seen by the fact that "the consumer class takes home 64% of the world income—32 times as much as the poor" (Durning 28). Also, the production of substances that are taken for granted, such as the paper on which this essay is printed, causes immense damage to the environment. Aside from the forests, which are clear-cut in order to obtain the raw materials, "Paper mills, also energy intensive, are heavy polluters of both air and water, releasing, among other things, dioxins that are among the most toxic known substances" (Durning 91). This is just one example out of the countless others which illustrate how irresponsible use of power negatively affects everyone. The people of today certainly do not seem to be living in accordance with nature, which has its own laws which help to provide balance. A possible amendment suggested by Durning is that "each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects for future generations to meet their own needs" (136). I believe that this advice can be applied to all areas where the responsible use of power is called into question. Instead of simply exerting their

dominance over a group of people less advanced than them, the technologically advanced people of the world should continue in striving to advance themselves without imposing themselves on others or the environment.

Many opponents of one or any of the aforementioned arguments may cite that the capability to commit an act is justification enough for its being done. One argument may be that people who exert dominance over a group of less-advanced people, or their environment, are only following the process of survival of the fittest. This would indicate that the strongest deserve to dominate. However, to rely on this as a means of justification is ridiculous. For exerting dominance over a weaker group of people, it has already been covered that it is by pure chance the advantageous people of the world came to possess the power they so freely wield, and since man is quick to remind himself that he is so far superior to other animals in manner and achievement, so too should he hold himself to a higher standard when dealing with fellow members of his own species. In respect to one's environment, to exert a certain amount of control is to be expected. However, humans have come to think of themselves as being above, and in total control of, nature. If we, as people, choose to bypass the laws of nature then we must also hold ourselves to a higher standard and begin to use our intelligence to preserve our environment instead of allowing our greed to destroy it. This suggests that we must not commit an act simply because we have the power to, but instead must think of the possible consequences of our actions before we commit them.

It was written that "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man" (Thoreau 209). This illustrates well the effects that come from one individual exerting dominance on any other person or thing. This is because if any living thing is forced to compromise its identity or way of life, then it is forced to undergo an immediate and drastic

change. Such a sudden change is surely in opposition to natural law and would irreparably damage those upon which it is inflicted. Jared Diamond's intriguing book on the evolution of the history of man helped me to realize that no one person or group of people has the right to intrude upon another simply because they may have the capabilities to do so. If we are to assume that we should be able to act as gods, then we must also be ready to assume the responsibility which unavoidably accompanies our actions.

Works Cited

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Ms. Pitzer's Comments: *I submitted Robert's paper to The Pick for his level of reflection and for the expression of his ideas. This paper, and other class assignments Robert submitted in the*

Historic Preservation class of the Cultural Resources Management Program, point to his understanding of the importance of a holistic approach to planning and preservation for our cultural and environmental resources.