

'Guns, Germs, and Steel' Reconsidered

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By [Scott Jaschik](#)

Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies has had the kind of impact that most scholarly authors can only dream about for their works. First published by W.W. Norton in 1997, the book won a Pulitzer Prize the next year for its author, [Jared Diamond](#), a professor of geography at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Almost immediately, the book sold much better than most serious works (more than 1 million copies) and started to turn up on college reading lists -- in courses on world history, anthropology, sociology and other fields. By 1999, the book was one of 12 recommended to freshmen at the University of California at Berkeley (along with some works that had been around a while longer, like Genesis and Exodus from the Bible). In 2001, Cornell University had all of its freshmen read the book. This summer, PBS broadcast a [series](#) based on the book, with Diamond explaining many of his ideas.

And in the last week, a relatively new blog in anthropology -- [Savage Minds](#) -- has set off a huge debate over the book. Two of the eight people who lead *Savage Minds* posted their objections to the book, and things have taken off from there, with several prominent blogs in the social sciences picking up the debate, and adding to it. Hundreds of scholars are posting and cross-posting in an unusually intense and broad debate for a book that has been out for eight years.

At the risk of oversimplifying Diamond's 440-page book, and the debate about it, the discussion goes something like this: Diamond's book argues that the differences in progress for different societies around the world do not result from one group being smarter or more resourceful than another. Rather, he focuses on the impact of geography -- whether food and other key items were plentiful, whether and how disease spread, and how these developments led to different levels of industrialization, and wealth. From beginning to end, Diamond stresses that he realizes that efforts to compare societies have frequently been used by racists or nationalists to belittle groups or justify mistreatment of them. He argues that his analysis is in fact anti-racism at work because it shows that the white people who enjoy the comforts of modern life are ultimately luckier than, not more deserving than, people in impoverished nations. (Diamond has not entered the online debates about his work and through a UCLA spokeswoman declined to comment for this article.)

In the *Savage Minds* discussions and elsewhere, the criticism focuses on whether Diamond has gone so far in focusing on the relative advances of some regions and countries that he is ignoring important distinctions in those regions and countries (poverty in Western nations, wealth in countries where most people are poor). Other critics say that for all of Diamond's efforts to combat racism, he has botched discussion of race, especially in Africa.

And some of the criticism also notes Diamond's star status, sometimes moving into a mocking tone of the sort that professors almost always receive when they get their own television shows. And that part of the criticism has given fodder to some of those coming to Diamond's defense. [Brad DeLong](#), for example, wrote that the *Savage Mind s* critics were an example of "injelitance," which has been defined as "the jealousy that the less-than-competent feel for the capable." He and others write that the critics haven't read Diamond carefully and misrepresent his ideas.

One of the posts that kicked off the debate was by Kerim Friedman, who recently earned his Ph.D. in anthropology at Temple University. He started by [focusing on the question](#) that Diamond uses to frame his book. Diamond quotes a man name Yali whom he meets in New Guinea who asks him, "Why you white man have so much cargo and we New Guineans have so little?" It's the wrong question, Friedman writes.

"While it *is* interesting and important to ask why technologies developed in some countries as opposed to others, I think it overlooks a fundamental issue: the inequality *within* countries as well as between them," Friedman writes. "I assure you that logging industry executives in New Guinea live better than you or I do! Both New Guinea and the United States are far more unequal (by some measures) than is India. Moreover, inequality throughout the world is *increasing* more rapidly now than every before. Although it is a contentious argument, economist Amartya Sen argues that inequality within countries can be more important than inequality between countries."

Friedman's *Savage Minds* colleague, Kathleen Lowrey (who writes as Ozma), was the other person to get things going. Lowrey, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta, offended many readers by saying that she hadn't bothered to finish *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and compared reading it to watching *Oedipus Rex* performed in Greek.

She argues that *Guns, Germs, and Steel* -- far from promoting equality -- [lets the West off the hook](#), and that's why the book is so popular.

"This is a punchline about race and history that many white people want desperately to hear," she writes. "Those dying black kids at the end of the special -- we know, because We Are Not Racist, that they don't deserve what they are getting. They are not inferior. In fact, there but for the grace of god.... And it poisonously whispers: mope about colonialism, slavery, capitalism, racism, and predatory neo-imperialism all you want, but these were/are nobody's fault. This is a wicked cop-out. Worse still, it is a profound insult to all non-Western cultures/societies. It basically says they're sorta pathetic, but that bless their hearts, they couldn't/can't help it. Such an assertion tramples upon all that anthropology holds dear, and is a sham sort of anti-racism."

If those charges weren't enough, another *Savage Minds* contributor, Tak Watanabe, a doctoral student in anthropology at Columbia University, questioned a [Diamond article on the Japanese](#) that was published in *Discover* in 1998. Writing in [Frog in a Well](#), which focuses on Japanese history, Watanabe criticizes Diamond for "a basic methodology of relying on environmental factors as a way to typologize groups of people according to 'race.' The danger here lies not so much in the conclusions given by Diamond, but in the biologism of his methodological assumption."

In all the discussions, the criticisms of Diamond are getting some support and some criticism. Attacks are particularly strong about the accusation that Diamond in some way was supporting racism. Writing in [Crooked Timber](#), Henry Farrell, an assistant professor of political science at George Washington University, writes, "It's fine and good to challenge Diamond's evidence and arguments with other evidence and counter arguments. That's what academic debate should be about. It's also fine to challenge particular styles of thinking if they're unable to come to grips with certain kinds of phenomena. But if you want to claim that certain kinds of reasoning are inherently racist and repugnant to right thinking people, which is what seems to be going on here, you had better have strong evidence to back up your accusations. So far, all I've seen a lot of vaguely worded innuendo. There's some underlying deformation of thinking here, and I'm not sure what's driving it."

Many people commenting on the controversy have endorsed Farrell's view -- and some have gone further in denouncing those at *Savage Minds*. According to one commenter at *Crooked Timber*, "Both *Savage Minds* pieces seem to exhibit one of the worst tics of the academic left -- a tendency to evaluate arguments exclusively with reference to whether or not they might, in some distorted form, serve the rhetorical purposes of one's political opponents. It's exactly the same approach to debate you find coming from the most thuggish members of the war party – whole lines of argument (e.g., Do our actions lead to more terrorism?) are ruled out from the start on the grounds that they stray too close to the other side's manner of thinking.

"What is so depressing about this approach isn't just that it's bad scholarship. It's that it rests on a complete misunderstanding of the point of scholarship, or at least a refusal to see arguments as anything rhetorical strategies."

Many others have been posting -- pro and con -- on specific parts of Diamond's books and the criticisms made of them. And in a number of cases, the debate starts with Diamond and gets broader.

Timothy Burke, who teaches African history at Swarthmore College, writing in [Cliopatria](#), says that Diamond's problem is "that a term like 'race' can still serve some useful purpose in describing variations between human populations: I'm not going to make a definitive statement on that subject here. But just to give the example of the Africa chapter, Diamond clings to the term 'blacks' as racial category within which to place most pre-1500 sub-Saharan Africans except for Khoisan-speakers and "pygmies," even as he explicitly acknowledges that it is an extremely poor categorical descriptor of the human groups he is placing in that category."

Further, Burke discusses other differences he has with Diamond's approach. "Anthropologists and historians interested in non-Western societies and Western colonialism also get a bit uneasy with a big-picture explanation of world history that seems to cancel out or radically de-emphasize the importance of the many small differences and choices after 1500 whose effects many of us study carefully," Burke writes. "For example, it seems to me that if you want to answer Yali's question with regards to Latin America versus the United States, you've got to think about the peculiar, particular kinds of political, legal and religious frameworks that differentiated Spanish colonialism in the New World from British and French colonialism, that a Latin American Yali would have to feel a bit dissatisfied with Diamond's answer.

"For me, I also feel a bit at a loss with any big-picture history that isn't much interested in the importance of accident and serendipity at the moment of contact between an expanding Europe and non-Western societies around 1500. That seems a part of Cortes' conquest of Montezuma, or the early beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade, when West African practices of kinship slavery fed quite incidentally into exchange with Portuguese explorers who weren't there for slaves at all. It may be that such accidents are not the cause of the material disparity that Yali describes, but in many cases, they're what makes the contemporary world feel the way that it does. It's not that Diamond argues against such matters, but he doesn't leave much room for them to matter, either."

The variety of criticism is a far cry from the tone of commentary when *Guns, Germs, and Steel* was published, with praise from top scholars like Paul Ehrlich and E.O. Wilson -- not to mention praise from Bill Gates, who blurbbed the book as "fascinating."

In an e-mail interview, Friedman says he's pleased with the way the debate has taken off since the initial posts on *Savage Minds*. He says that he was taken aback by some who seemed to question "our very right to comment on the book," but he says that he thinks that there is now a lot of "reasoned debate" going on.

Friedman says, however, that people have misunderstood some of the earlier comments about Diamond, who Friedman says is "rightly hailed as an anti-racist."

The problem isn't just in what Diamond has written, but how it is used and understood, Friedman says. "People think that when we say these things we are either (a) calling Diamond a racist, or (b) calling them racists for liking Diamond. We are doing no such thing. We are saying that the kinds of environmental arguments Diamond uses are a problematic way of addressing racism."

In fact, Friedman says that Diamond should be praised for doing work that relates to so many fields. "By crossing disciplinary boundaries, scholars like Diamond can help shake us out of disciplinary assumptions that might themselves be problematic."

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