

**Power, politics and environmental change**

MA Environmental Humanities 2014-15

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

# Class 9: The force of nature

**Christos Zografos, PhD**

Institute of Environmental Science & Technology (ICTA)

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

[christos.zografos@uab.cat](mailto:christos.zografos@uab.cat)

# Introduction

- **Purpose:** nature (geography) can determine the course of environmental change
- **Why** important to know?
  - A powerful, popular but limited explanation of what is the driving force behind environmental change brought by humans

# Class outline

- Watch video: 'Guns, germs, and steel'
  - By Prof Jared Diamond
- While watching, think/ make notes:
  - What is **the question** JD tries to answer?
  - What is **the answer** he gives?
- Have a discussion – based on questions (concerning Diamond's explanation)

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6846344734969027300>

# **GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL EPISODE TWO: 'CONQUEST'**

“What explains unequal distribution of wealth and power among societies around world?” - “Yali’s question” (min 4.40-7.00)

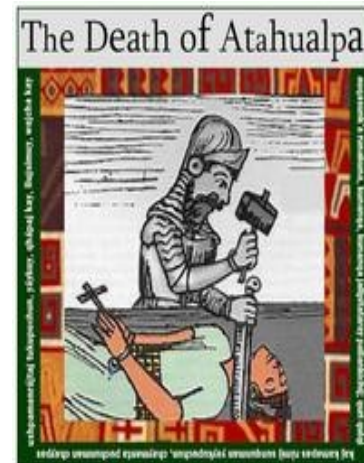
## **THE QUESTION**

“Distribution of **wealth and power** among societies around the world has been powerfully shaped by **bio-geographic factors**” (they explain unequal distribution)

**THE ANSWER**

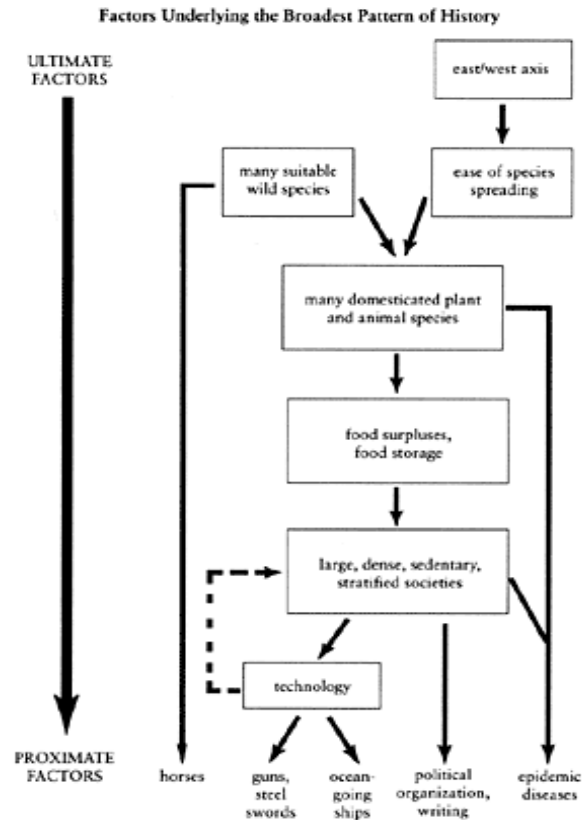
# A note: JD and ecological change

- Why are we interested in this?
- This documentary seems to be a story about colonialism
- But it is also an explanation of ‘why’ (driving forces) behind the types of environments or **ecologies** produced by colonialism
  - i.e. explanation of **reasons why** of **environmental change** in colonies
- i.e. ecologies hostile to its ‘previous’ inhabitants: disease (germs; yellow fever vectors) and pollution (Potosi)



# The argument (McNeill, 2001)

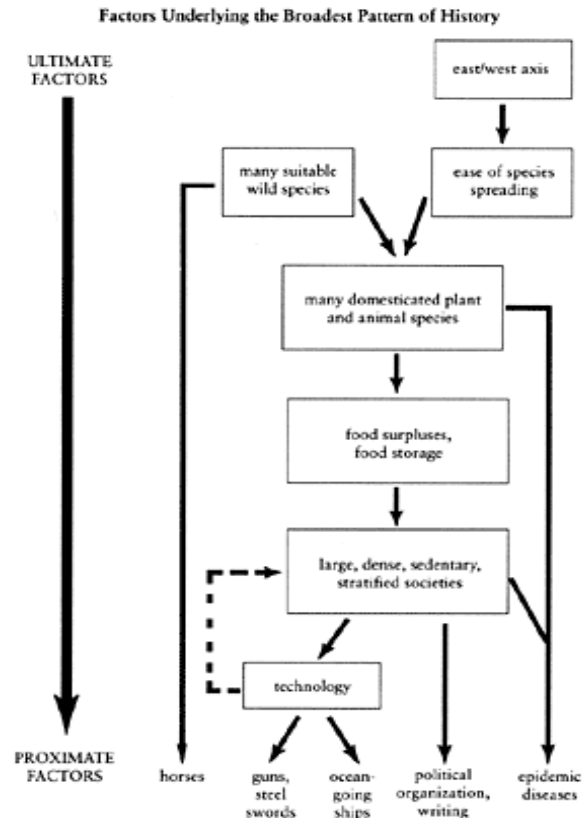
- **Proximate causes** of success in history: guns, germs, and steel
- But behind them lay the **ultimate causes** of success: a favourable environmental endowment [geography]





# Ultimate causes (McNeill, 2001)

- **Environmental endowment** (baggage/ rucksack) sharply favoured some societies (continents) over others
  - Highly probable that lucky ones would in time prevail over unlucky
- Great **advantages**: parts of world fortunate to
  - have many domesticable plants and animals
  - located so as to favour the migration and diffusion of domesticated plants and animals (the E-W nexus of knowledge/ technology diffusion)
- These parts of world:
  - developed **useful things** farming, metallurgy, writing, states, etc. earlier than other societies
  - earlier exposure to "crowd diseases," and so earned **wider immunities** to lethal infections earlier



# How do you find this explanation?

- The **force** of geography:
  - Given the importance of ‘initial natural endowments’
  - Eurasian dominance was inevitable, or at least very likely
  - i.e. initial endowments strongly determine the result of the encounter between Europeans and America (its peoples and ecologies)
- **Geographical determinism**
  - Determinism: “theory that all **events**, *including moral choices*, are completely **determined by previously existing causes**. Determinism is usually understood to preclude free will because it entails that *humans cannot act otherwise* than they do.” (Encycl. Britannica)
  - Causal determinism: “idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature (Stanford Encycl. of Philosophy)”
- What about **other factors** (‘silenced’ by author)? **Think of any?**
  - The importance of local ecologies?
  - The importance of socio-political factors?

# Local ecological conditions

- **Ecological conditions that prevailed in colonies** (*note difference to Diamond*) governed **probabilities of success** or failure of colonial project
  - Mosquitoes
  - Plantation ecologies and swamps: mosquito incubator & habitat sites
  - *Lowly mosquitoes and mindless viruses exploited by humans in course of int'l politics vs. powerful external geographies, shape human international affairs*
- Do only military-advanced and epidemiologically immune Europeans (Spaniards) had the power? How about lowly mosquitoes and African viruses in the colonies?

# Other socio-political factors made invisible

- **Eurocentrist**

- Blaut: examples of North-South diffusion of crops in Western Hemisphere, e.g. cultivation of maize in Peru -> adoption in North America

- **Political factors: important**

- Importance of politics: Ottoman closure of lucrative trading routes to Orient -> traders: look for other trade routes
- Trade and importance of culture: individualism, capitalism, rationalism, etc.

- **Technological-military superiority**

- European dominance and colonial success not always based on clear technological superiority in armaments, nor the spread of disease (e.g. Brits in India dependent on local military force + divide-and-rule policy)

# Conclusion

- Geography or environment can be powerful explanations of where sources of power lie
- However, too much or *single* emphasis on them may hide from view or even silence the role (*capacity*) of other human and non-human actors in shaping history and ecology
  - ...and hence provide limited explanations of socio-ecological phenomena
- Always ask yourselves + question others (explanations): whose actors' voices are silenced in an explanation?
  - And, how do these voices influence the course of history and/or environmental change?

## CLASS QUESTION

Similarly to JD, McNeill tells us that ‘nature’ or ‘the environment’ (mosquitoes, swamps, etc.) is crucial for shaping human fortunes (e.g. colonisation project)

But, his argument, his explanation of the importance of nature in making history is different from Jared Diamond’s

How? In what is it different?

- Part of difference: *degree they emphasise* ‘determinant’ role of nature
  - “I will, as authors often do, underplay other considerations”
- More clear difference: McNeill emphasis on *interaction* of physical – social factors rather than determinant role of one of them
  - “this is not an essay on mosquito or environmental determinism”

## **CLASS ACTIVITY**

We have looked at three ways in which power operates (and sources of power): structure, discourse, and nature. I'd like to know what points 'struck' you the most!

Get into groups, discuss and provide answers to following points (15 min)

Then, present your answers in the class (5 min each group)

## **What Stuck?**

- An "Aha" moment
- A pleasant surprise
- Something that you had to struggle with to understand
- Something you don't agree with
- Something that you agree with strongly
- Something you thought was particularly interesting
- Something you didn't expect
- An insight or solution
- Something you want to know more about
- A question that you have