

# **Power, politics and environmental change**

MA Environmental Humanities 2012-13

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

## **Class 7**

### **The role of nature in environmental change I: determinism**

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# Introduction

- **Purpose:** nature (geography) can also determine the course of environmental change
- **Why** important to know?
  - Another explanation (i.e. beyond social factors) 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)

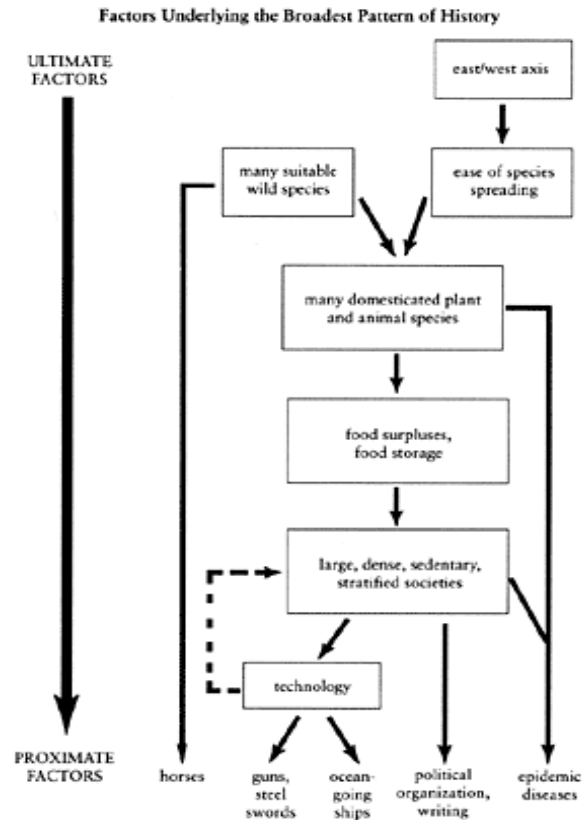
## **THE QUESTION**

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

**THE ANSWER**

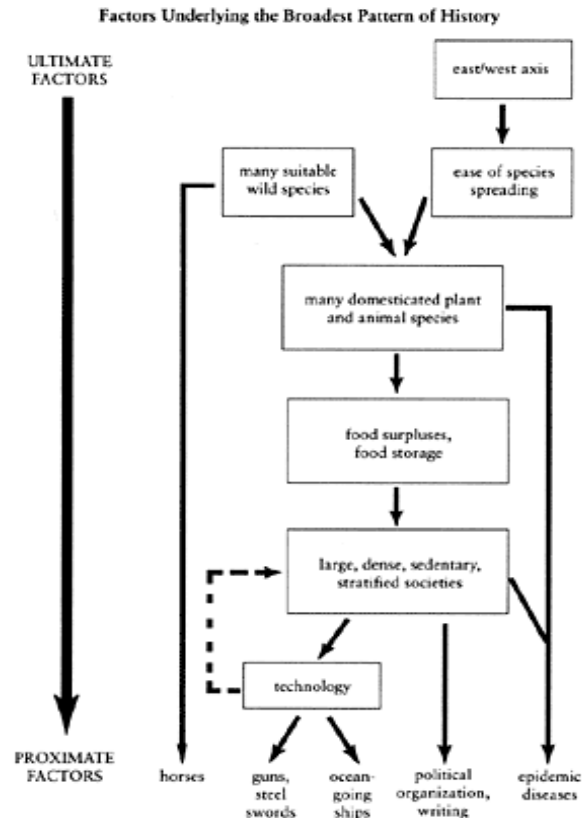
# The argument (McNeill, 2001)

- **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)

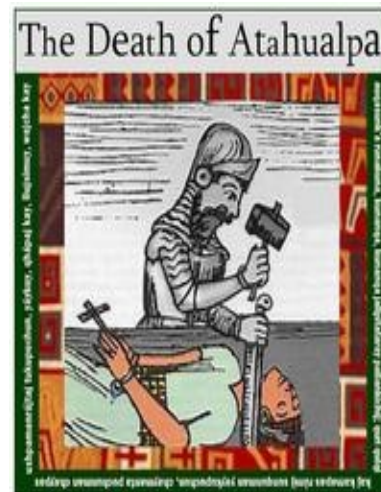
- **Environmental endowment** (baggage/ rucksack) sharply favoured some societies (continents) over others
  - Highly probable that lucky ones would in time prevail over unlucky
- Great **advantages**: parts of world fortunate to
  - have many domesticable plants and animals
  - located so as to favour 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





# 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)



# Classroom question: your views

- How do you find JD's explanation?
  - Agree, disagree? With what? Why?
- Does this explanation 'leave out' anything?
  - If yes, what may that be?

# Criticism: determinism

- **Geographical** determinism
  - Given the importance of ‘initial natural endowments’
  - Eurasian dominance was inevitable, or at least very likely
  - i.e. initial endowments [can] determine the result of the encounter between Europeans and America (its peoples and ecologies)
- This seems to suggest: if you are in a position of power you will [unavoidably] end up using this?
  - Culture of domination/ necessity to dominate: is this important?
  - Is **culture** (of domination) relevant for understanding production of colonial ecologies and environmental change in the colonies?

# Local factors

- Possible power (“ability to control their environment including behaviour of other entities”) of:

## 1. Local populations?

- The actions of those populations have also shaped history and environment
- E.g. early Inca uprisings responsible for shaping colonial realities too – they are also part of history. Does JD look at/ consider these?

## 1. Local ecologies?

- **Local environmental conditions** have also shaped course of colonial project (in its ecological terms also) – next class

# Final note on criticism: general

- **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.

- **Weaknesses in arguments**

- 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)