

Video Questions

Video: Guns, Germs, and Steel – Out of Eden

Today's video examines the early social innovations that made cities possible. Jared Diamond, the writer of the book that this video was created from, brings a uniquely geographic perspective to our class. Diamond emphasizes the importance of human-environment interactions in shaping the development of human societies around the globe. While the focus of this video is not solely on cities, the background provided here is a valuable (and interesting) supplement to your textbook reading for this week. Try as best you can to see the ties that link the urban developments discussed in your reading with the social developments highlighted in the video.

The video begins with a definition of some of the key questions addressed by Diamond's research. One of the important questions addressed from the beginning of the video relates to the inequality we see all around us. Why is there so much material inequality – distinct groups of “haves” and “have nots”? Why do we in North America have so much, while people in New Guinea or much of Africa have so little?

1. How does Diamond approach the disparity in wealth captured in Yali's question: “Why do white men have so much ‘cargo’, while New Guineans have so little?” – what kind of answer does Diamond discard from the beginning?
2. The video shows that both hunting and gathering present some fundamental problems for supporting a large population. Why would a large, urban population not rely solely on hunting and gathering to support the community's existence?
3. Based on the archaeological findings discussed in the video (field work of Dr. Ian Kuijt), what were two key innovations that Middle Eastern people made thousands of years ago that allowed them to survive drought and begin to build an urban community?

4. The Middle East appears to be the first world region to develop farming methods that made urban development possible.

a. What other regions listed in the video were among the first to develop farming?

b. In every one of these early farming regions except for one, urban development followed. Which was the only exception? Why did this region not develop in the same way?

5. Diamond uses this finding to build a partial explanation for the existence of inequality on the planet. What's the basic idea behind this initial level of explanation?

6. The video acknowledges that this first, agriculture-based explanation looks very useful. However, the video also states that this first explanation is also fairly simple, and that there must be more to account for worldwide inequality beyond agriculture. Where does Diamond's research go next in his search for further explanation? What is the basic idea behind this next level of explanation?

7. The video provides evidence indicating that the Middle East is one of the most favored regions worldwide in terms of this second explanation for inequality. The video also shows how people in the Middle East used these advantages to develop cities and technologies. Summarize the advances you see in this section of the video.

8. The video goes on to show that, although the Middle East had many initial advantages and saw much urban development over the centuries, much of the region is uninhabitable today. Why? What lessons might we draw from this experience?

9. Even though the Middle East has declined, the ideas developed in the region have not died. Indeed, they have spread to other, specific regions of the world. How have these advancements spread, and how does Diamond explain the geographic pattern we see in this spread?

10. How have some people criticized the explanations that Diamond advances in this video? What do you think about Diamond's explanations and their shortcomings?

View only episode 1.