

In his movie Guns, Germs, and Steel, Jared Diamond argues that geography gives certain cultures advantages or disadvantages, which determine whether or not that culture will be a dominant one. This is a very convincing position because nearly every pre-modern culture has the assistance of some convenience, the advent of which can be attributed to at least one geographical feature. Although there are certain cultural anomalies that can change a civilization's destiny, such as religion, a great mind, or what can be called luck, when an individual discovers something that greatly influences society (namely inventions, such as a horse-drawn plow or the printing press), the more common case is that the disparity between races can be credited to geography. For instance, the most obvious factor is the fertility of the land. If a civilization occupies an area that has the capacity to grow a surplus of food, the people of this region have the luxury of specializing jobs, and broadening their sphere of influence. Another important factor is climate. The environment of a region dictates not only what type of food can be grown (sustaining crops like wheat or rice, as opposed to spices and such), but also how much a race can produce. If a nation has to stop everything to wait out a harsh winter, it is not going to be as productive as a civilization that has mild weather all year. One last major influence is the presence of domesticated livestock. Plow animals can greatly increase the efficiency and productivity of farming communities. Also, living in close contact with domesticated animals leads to immunity from diseases that might affect another culture that didn't have the good fortune of having livestock. All of these factors lead to a culture that has the time and resources to expand and perhaps dominate other peoples. Thus, the success of a nation is almost invariably linked to its geographic boons.

Geography can also act as a shield for a society. Mountains can protect a city from attacks; however they also make it more difficult to interact with other surrounding cities. Similarly, a river can make it easy to import or export goods, yet it can also pose health threats or flood. In short, there are innumerable ways geography can affect a culture, and they can be traced as root causes of many other irregularities between cultures.

The large continent of Asia contained many diverse areas, each with their own set of circumstances, many of which depended on geography. These circumstances held great influence in the development of those areas, leading to variations across the continent regarding the agricultural, industrial, and political situation. These situations, in turn, greatly affected the outcome of interactions between the parts of Asia and other Western powers, specifically the European powers. One place where certain circumstances caused by geography affected development and foreign interaction was the Asian subcontinent of India. Here, the guns and steel of European powers, especially of the British, made the difference in the subjugation of the British powers. The advanced British technology included superior firepower, a knowledge of successful colonization techniques, and, most importantly, advanced military techniques which allowed the British to easily overcome a severe disadvantage in troop numbers against the Indians. The root of these inequalities, which favored the British, stems from Indian and European geography. While both India and Europe had developed civilizations, Europe had gained a "lead" in technology for a variety of reasons. One lead was the advanced firepower and military techniques, which stemmed from the fact that the closeness of European countries had led to greater interactions, which spread and developed new technologies more quickly and led to increased military "practice," which led to a better understanding

of military techniques. Another geographical reason for the European subjugation of India lay in the crops that could grow there, such as cotton, tea, and spices. These crops gave Europeans an incentive to conquer this area because it offered financial rewards. The reason that India was able to grow these cash crops lay in their geographical position, again showing how geography led to inequalities and domination of India by Europeans.

Another region where geography greatly affected the history of that area was the Dutch East Indies, mostly comprised of modern day Indonesia and the Philippines. Here, longstanding historical inequities pushed the people of these areas to be conquered by European powers. Across these islands, just as on the island of Papua New Guinea in Diamond's film, the inability to grow food easily and communicate with others led to a slower development of technology, resulting from the fact that most of the time people were occupied with feeding themselves and not with developing new technologies and advanced societies, which may have helped them hold off European powers. The inability to grow enough food productively on the island is a direct result of geographical placement, further supporting the hypothesis that geography is the main reason for these inequities.

Another part of Asia where geography affected inequalities was in French Indochina, an area now comprised of the countries around Vietnam. Here, many European powers tried to conquer the people and land, but none were ever completely successful. While it is true that due to the geographical reasons shown above, there were no guns or steel in Indochina, another aspect of geography kept Europeans from conquering the area. The jungles and tropical climate that were so prevalent in Indochina, which was a result of their geographical placement, kept many Western Powers from penetrating the landscape. While powers such as the French tried to keep control, the control was never solidified as in other places, leading to constant conflicts all the way up to the Vietnam War, where it is certain that geography played a role in determining the outcome of that war. Here, in Indochina, geography resulted in slower technological advancement, but also resulted in the ability of the people there to resist foreign subjugation.

Another area of the world that faced inequalities due to geography was that of Africa. Here inequities were obviously caused by the low productivity of workers in Africa, which was caused by geography. The presence of the tsetse fly and corresponding sleeping sickness and bad soils for agricultural growth led to low productivity when growing food and an inability for Africans to develop in other ways. This low productivity of workers in Africa, caused by geography, led to an increase in the slave trade out of Africa, because it was more profitable to have an African slave working on productive land elsewhere than on the land in Africa. This, combined with the fact that Africans had been exposed to a variety of pathogens and were resistant to many (which was also a function of their geography), led to a large African slave trade, which could be deemed one of the primary reasons for African inequality. The geography of Africa also had another effect on the development and subsequent inequalities in Africa. The arid and harsh land of sub-Saharan Africa makes communication and centralization across Africa fairly difficult, creating many different tribes in Africa. The conflicts between these different tribes stunted national development in Africa, while also creating situations that were easy for imperial Europeans to exploit. All of these reasons stemmed from geography thereby causing an inequality in Africa that still lasts today.

Europe's conquering of Central/South America is a good example that supports Diamond's idea that "geography is destiny". Geographically, Central/South America is a continent that is isolated from the rest of the world. Due to this isolation, the inhabitants of this region were extremely vulnerable to outside diseases and had no contact/trade with the more advanced Asian and European empires. They could not acquire more animals for food or travel. After the Spanish conquered Central/South America, many Spaniards immigrated to the New World in search of jobs. The Spaniards then built cattle ranches, silver mines, sugar plantations, and huge estates for other crops. The Spanish crown established the encomienda system, which let the Spanish force the Amerindians into virtual slavery. The Amerindians then started dying in enormous rates; the best explanation for this occurrence is disease. Because the Amerindians were geographically isolated from the rest of the world, the diseases the Spaniards brought with them were completely alien to the Amerindians. Since contact with other societies, farm animals, and other people built up the Europeans' immune system and bodily resistance, the Amerindians were doomed to die. The small and crowded mines were great places for the diseases to spread as the miners then brought the diseases back home to their own villages. In Central/South America the native animals for food included wild turkeys and game while the native animals for travel and burden included alpacas and llamas. The Spanish easily had the advantage in animals needed for food, travel and burden. The Spanish had horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, pigs, chickens, and goats. The Spanish could use these animals for eating and the transportation of people and goods. In modern day Mexico, the Aztecs used solely man power to carry rocks to build the Aztec Temples. Consequently, the Amerindians were hindered by their geography because they only had llamas and Alpacas to carry their goods. Since the Amerindians were so greatly occupied by farming and building houses and temples, they did not have the extra time to think about making metal weapons, exploring other places, building strategically efficient armies, developing industrial skill, and improving their knowledge of science. Because of their two different geographies, the Amerindians stood no chance against the Spaniards.

Another example of how geography decides which civilizations are more advanced and successful than others is the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was geographically between the East and the West of the world. This geographic position was a great advantage for the Ottomans because virtually all trade had to travel through their empire, and they could then charge vast amounts of money on the travelers and their goods. The Russians started trying to gain more territories because they wanted this same advantage. Wars with Russia halted the growth of its economy, military, industries, and scientific advantages. During the wars, many different provinces gained their independence, including the Greeks. The Russians however were landlocked and had no access to the ocean as Europe had. Instead of trying to conquer the Ottoman Empire, the Europeans decided to try and find new sea routes to the East. If the Europeans could do this they would not need the Ottoman Empire to trade with the East, and that is exactly what they did. Also, the many uprisings and rebellions as well as the rising power of Egypt prompted the Ottoman Empire to call on Europe for help. After Europe answered this call, the Europeans virtually held entire control over the Ottoman Empire. Europe forced them to impose new laws concerning the free importation of foreign goods, which drastically damaged the Ottoman Empire's economy. Meanwhile in Egypt, Muhammad Ali was developing a great nation. He used his geographic position

and commercial agriculture to help pay for his goal of a modern industry in Egypt. Ali's son Ismail also took advantage of his geographic position by starting huge irrigation networks that allowed cotton production and consequently exports to greatly increase. He also used his geographic position to build the Suez Canal, which drastically shortened the trip from Europe to Asia. However, Ismail borrowed too much money for his projects and caused Egypt to fall into bankruptcy which again, gave Europe the upper hand in power.

Today, the status of nations and rising powers is affected by more than just geography. There are complex economic, political, and social networks that determine a nation-state's power. Capitalism and Christianity are a large part of Western civilization and the Western powers of today. Cultural and religious differences in certain parts of the world make compromise and political stability very difficult to maintain because of the far-reaching effects culture can have on a region's power. Additionally, instead of relying solely on geography and military power, economic interests are increasingly essential. World War I and World War II are examples of struggles that involved political, economic, and military issues that took place on a world stage instead of a confined and local one. Even the fight between humans and disease has taken on a different character as people now resist illnesses as a globe instead of as individual local communities. Through increased human contact during trade and travel, viruses and bacteria can move further distances with a lesser amount of time.

Yet despite these shifts in sources of power, geography is still highly important. Regions with unpredictable, tropical climates that experience devastating natural disasters are often more prone to economic and political instability. One example of this is the effect Hurricane Katrina had on Louisiana and the resulting destruction of local businesses and homes. Also, the world powers of today can trace the sources of their present power to the early "head starts" they had as emerging civilizations with an agricultural surplus, adequate livestock, and extra time on their hands to develop technologies, ideologies, and the like. Similarly, those regions that were exploited as colonies earlier on are only now beginning their struggle to keep up with the present global powers. Cultures that had emerged in a single area and then spread along lines of latitude to nearby regions still hold onto the same values that come into play when dealing with cultural differences now. The spread of cultures and values has very much to do with geography, and today, cultures can often be identified with neighboring lands. For example, the countries of Scandinavia are culturally similar as well as geographic neighbors. Also, different religions can be found in certain regions. For example, Christianity was spread through Christian missionaries, who at the time, could only spread their faith to the places that they visited. In addition, the increasingly limited resources available to us are in increasingly limited places. As an example, the finite amount of fresh water and oil has prompted research towards conservation and alternative energy sources.

In the future, geography will still play a major role in determining the world's leading powers. Diamond's idea that "geography is destiny" holds true as everything that happens today is linked to what has already happened in the past, and the events of the past were largely affected by geography. The shifts that have already taken place signal that change is bound to take place in the future. The increased tendency to deal with issues as a global community means that the role of geography will be continually downplayed against the immense capabilities of more and more technology and

communication. However, geography is inevitable and unavoidable and in some sense, the instinctual definition of destiny and who we are as the human race.