Against the Grain

Volume 9 | Issue 6 Article 16

December 1997

Book Reviews

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Health Care at the Abyss: Managed Care vs. the Goals of Medicine by Erin Dominique Williams and Leo van der Reis. Buffalo, New York; William S. Hein & Co., Inc., 1997. 227 pp. ISBN: 1-57588-201-9.

Reviewed by **Elizabeth Connor** (Medical University of South Carolina) <connor@musc.edu>

Written by an attorney (Williams) and a physician (van der Reis), this book offers unique insights into how managed care threatens the promise of universal health care. Published for the **Quincy Foundation for Medical Research** in San Francisco, this book includes a ten-page historical perspective of modern medicine, as the authors discuss financial and technological imperatives, and suggest a consensus proposal (Quincy Model) to improve health care delivery. In a nutshell, the Quincy Model calls for the establishment of an autonomous trust that would set quality care standards and be responsible for disbursing funds for services and for allocating funds for capital investments. Required reading for health care executives, hospital administrators, legislators and others interested in health care reform.

Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies by Jared Diamond. WW Norton & Co, 1997. ISBN 0-393-03891-2

480 pages; $27.50

Reviewed by **Barry Fast** <barryf@acbc.com>

Why did the Spanish "discover" America, but the Indians never discover Europe? Why did British settlers decimate the Australian Aborigines, instead of the reverse? Why were a few Europeans able to colonize Africa, create the slave trade, and rule a huge continent peopled largely by stone age hunter/gatherers.? Why, when we look back over the last 10,000 years, do we notice that people inhabiting the EuroAsian continent were able to develop highly specialized, technically advanced, militarily superior civilizations? Compared to other peoples, EuroAsians evolved these advanced civilizations while American, African and Australian natives remained in or near the Stone Age.

The answer, traditionally, has been so racist that it is no longer fashionable to ask the question. But **Jared Diamond**, professor of physiology and master of such disciplines as biogeography, anthropology, historical linguistics and archeology, has the courage to ask the question. The answer is sobering news for any of us white folks who feel superior. We are not smarter. We are not better. We just happened to live and evolve our social structure in a huge continent that stretches east to west along relatively narrow latitudinal lines, enjoying a relative uniformity of climate, and therefore a rich assortment of agricultural and domestication possibilities. And we had some other lucky breaks as well.

Originally we were all hunter/gatherers. People who live this way are constrained by the readily available food supply, and this life requires equal work from everyone. Unless these bands and clans live in an area of unusual abundance, they rarely have the time, energy or excess food to enable the evolution of specialists, non-workers who can refine tools or build permanent housing. Farmers, on the other hand, are able to grow surplus food, enough to feed non-growers who can work on improving technology, enhancing political systems, and building towns and irrigation systems. When conflict arises, farmers always defeat hunter/gatherers because they generally have larger populations, better organizational systems and more sophisticated technology. The fact that farming-based societies are more highly evolved than hunter/gatherer societies is, in Diamond's words, the "proximate causes" for the European/Asian dominance of the world over the last 1000 years or so.

The reasons these EuroAsian societies developed guns, were widely infected with germs (as many as 90% of American natives were killed by European-introduced diseases), and invented steel, can be found in the "ultimate cause" of their dominance. For example, paleobotanists have identified 56 prehistoric heavy-seeded wild grasses that formed the core group of plants from which agriculture, the domestication of these plants, evolved. Agriculture happened gradually, by accident or sporadically, as gatherers began to see certain plants grow well around their encampments, especially their latrines. Farming was learned as successful growers found ways to irrigate and fertilize these crops. Excess food production from successful farming enabled the people to specialize into tool makers, irrigation designers and home builders as permanent settlements became necessary to care for crops. Populations grew, leading to more innovation, like writing and counting, and the need to organize tribes into governed groups. Larger populations spread, resulting in fights against hunter/gatherer clans whose land the farmers needed or wanted, and the farmers won these fights due to better organization and the sheer size of their populations.

In a quick trip around the world, Diamond identifies 33 of these prehistoric large seeded grasses as growing naturally in the west Asian area we now call the Fertile Crescent. This compares to only six species in eastern Asia, four in Sub-Saharan Africa, four in North America, just five in Mesoamerica (Mexico and its surroundings), only two in South America, and none in most of Australia. Fertile Crescent dwellers, with the largest abundance of naturally occurring large seeded grasses, developed the most advanced and successful agricultural societies. But there was more. In and around the Fertile Crescent grew the largest varieties of naturally occurring cereals and pulses (peas and other legumes). The prehistoric farmers added many of these plants to their enriching agriculture. In America, SubSaharan Africa and Australia there were very few, if any, natural cereals and pulses.

The technological leap from hand tool farming to the use of domesticated animals was the equivalent of the invention of the steam engine, in its effect on the growth of populations and the complexity of societies. Here, too, the EuroAsian inhabitants had a huge advantage over Africans, Americans and Australians EuroAsia had 72 large, terrestrial, herbivorous wild mammals that were candidates for domestication. Of these, the EuroAsians domesticated 13, or 18% of the candidates. These run the gamut from horses, cows, sheep, goats, camels and pigs to yaks and water buffalo. EuroAsians had an astonishing variety of domesticated, hard working animals by about 6,000 years ago. But in SubSaharan Africa, with 51 species of large, terrestrial, herbivorous wild mammal candidates, prehistoric people were able to domesticate exactly none. Hippos, rhinos, elephants (which can be trained, but difficult to breed and raise in captivity, the definition of domestication), the various antelope and wildebeast, are all either too big, too skittish, or lacking in a good herd mentality in their wild state. Even today, with all our science, no one has

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successfully domesticated a zebra, even though it looks and feels like a horse, or any other African herbivorous mammal. Diamond explains all this in fascinating detail. .

The Americans were nearly as bad off, with only the llama as a domesticated herbivore, and only in an isolated region of South America. It was not that American natives were not interested in domesticating animals. American Indians were among the earliest domesticators of dogs (from wolves), and when the Spanish brought horses to America, the plains Indians of North America became, within a century, among the world's greatest riders and breeders. Australians, like most Americans and Africans, had no wild candidates for domestication except dogs.

The prehistoric natives of the inhabited continents were entirely the beneficiaries or victims of geography. When the Fertile Crescent gave birth to agriculture 12,000 years ago it was, in effect, a demonstration project for hunter/gatherers living near that area. They were either absorbed by these much stronger farmers, or they copied their farming technologies. Because the EuroAsian mega-continent stretches east/west along relatively narrow latitudinal lines, the crops that grew well in this temperate northern climate could be mostly transferred toward the edges of the continent. Wheat that grew well in the Crimea flourished in central China and France. Horses from central Asia prospered in Spain and China. But Andean llamas could not survive a trek across the hot, narrow isthmus separating North and South America, cows could not survive a trip across the Sahara, camels would die of jungle rot in the Congo, peas and lentils would never make a farming transfer from the Mediterranean climate of southern Europe, across the deserts and then wet equatorial Africa, to the fertile Mediterranean climate of southern Africa. So no Bantu living in southern Africa ever saw or heard of a pea, let alone all the other nutritious crops and domesticated animals that grew and worked in a similar climate 6000 miles to the north.

Nearly all the epidemic diseases that ravaged European and Asian cities for most of the last few thousand years originated as a transfer from domesticated mammals to mankind. These include measles, TB and smallpox from cattle, flu from pigs, and malaria from ducks and chickens. EuroAsians lived closely with these animals for thousands of years, and although there were frequent devastating epidemics, most people developed a partial or full immunity over that time period. But when Europeans made contact with natives of America and Australia, the diseases they brought did more to decimate those natives than any other factor. Pizzaro conquered the Aztecs with a force of under 200 men, not because of his brilliant military tactics, but because the Aztec leadership, and tens of thousands of their followers, had been destroyed by Spanish-introduced smallpox a few years before. Australian natives suffered a similar fate, and far more Africans were killed by European diseases than were killed in wars with the invaders.

Scientists have recently established through DNA analysis that Neanderthal and Cro Magnon man split off from a single ancestral species. They theorize that Neanderthals were eventually killed off by Cro Magnon hominids, and Cro Magnon evolved into us, Homo Sapiens, about 100,000 years ago. This, most scientist agree, is too short a time period for the evolution of significant differences in intelligence and other meaningful traits among Homo Sapiens. Our cultural differences, our level of technological sophistication, stem from our location on the globe, our climate and the nature of the terrain separating large societal groups of humans from others. Our proximity to agricultural and animal domestication possibilities, and the adoption of these possibilities into our way of life, enabled some of us to advance while others remained relatively static.

Environment has been the most compelling force in human history, even to this day. Why did Europe, in the last 500 years, catch up to China with its substantial headstart in technology and political organization? A look at the map of Europe provides the answer. Compared to the Chinese sub-continent, Europe is a collection of islands, peninsulas, and areas isolated by mountains. Civilizations arose in these areas, such as the Greek, Roman, Scandinavian, Spanish and English political states, and eventually broke out of their native lands and competed fiercely with each other. War is a great motivator of technological innovation, and the history of Europe is largely a litany of war. China, by comparison, developed a homogeneous politically stable civilization thousands of years ago, and then isolated itself from the rest of the EuroAsian continent. This self-imposed isolation, made possible by an early development of agriculture and the political systems that sustain it, within a large well-connected landmass, resulted gradually in atrophy and then decline. Europe's geography produced competitive, innovative societies; China's geography made possible political stability with little competition, resulting in the demise of innovation.

The technology that began as farming in central Asia 12000 years ago has culminated in air travel, satellites and the Internet. Our technology has made war, on the grand scale, too risky. Instead, we compete economically, but the result is the same. Competition, once practiced between farmers and hunter/gatherers, then between tribes

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and city states, and finally among different civilizations called countries, is now global. And this global competition spurs innovation and technological advances at an increasing rate. For a long time environment and geography gave some of us advantages over others, but it is obvious that the end of isolation will gradually eliminate geographically-induced advantages. A sheep cloned in Scotland is instant news in Thailand. A new rice strain developed in Thailand can be grown next week in Tanzania. You can eat a Big Mac in Moscow and Nairobi, and quinoa from Peru was last year's trendy food in New York restaurants. This year it's Chilean sea bass.

Throughout Jared Diamond's book, he interweaves observations from his twenty years among the hunter/gatherer mountain tribes of New Guinea. He is not a sentimentalist; he does not romanticize them into the Noble Savage. He reports, for instance, that the leading cause of death among these people is murder. But at the same time he believes that the average child in these tribes is smarter, more social, and more self-sufficient than the average American child, despite a lack of exposure to technology. In fact, he blames technology, especially television, for this dumbing down process in our culture (the average American child consumes seven hours a day in front of the boob tube). I believe that *Sesame Street* and other "quality" children's programming is the culprit, teaching children not to read but rather to watch, passively and alone, resulting in the life-long couch potato habit. We are out of touch with our history, our social evolution. No society ever valued this kind of assault on its children, let alone tolerated it.

Mono Lake Stories by **Martha Clark Cummings**.
Rowbarge Press, 0-9646201-2-X, $8.95
Reviewed by **Jeffrey M. Wilhite** (Governments Documents Librarian, U, of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019)
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The various lives, experiences, loves, desires, and losses of contemporary lesbians are explored in Cummings' debut book, *Mono Lake Stories*. Through the nine stories we meet Robin, Ginger Darling, Molly, Chloe, The Duchess, Maxine, Jill, Helen, Lillian and many other warm and passionate women. Each of the stories present lesbians living life. Compassion, irony, and wisdom make the stories human; yet the threads of loneliness, threat and isolation make the stories real. Although these nine stories are dissimilar in their portrayal of various women throughout the country and in different time periods, they all contain the major undercurrent of lesbians coming to terms with the ramifications of their sexuality. The nine stories cover many topics of the human condition: family, love, lost love, children, home. Some noteworthy topical themes found in this book are: drug addiction, family strife, and sexual harassment. Moreover, the stories cover many topics of a lesbian and gay genesis: first experiences, coming out, the "bar scene," being closeted, and family tension. Cummings adroitly weaves the experiences of gay women into the tapestry of modern society. Taken as a whole, these stories show the diversity, the joy, and the troubles that reside within that world.

The title of the collection comes from the first story, "Mono Lake." This story is about a heroin addict living in the Eastern Sierra. The unnamed female protagonist works as a room cleaner in her sister's motel. The brother-in-law has made passes at the young woman and continues to do so. The female protagonist is in love with a local waitress, but seems more concerned with trying to kick her heroin habit. In one memorable passage, the main character compares herself and her would-be-girlfriend to the tufa towers which rise up out of Mono Lake: " We stand there, tall and strange and beautiful, mysterious shapes formed by a mixture of elements that is ordinary but almost never happens. For a few short months in the summer, the tourists come ... and stare at us ... And then the road is closed for the winter and that's that." This typifies the beautiful and emotionally sympathetic portrayal of Cummings' characters but also perfectly captures their sometimes lonely and often elegiac existence.

The Sapphic theme continues through out the remainder of the stories. In "Absence Makes the Heart," the main character, Robin, is forced to visit her family at Christmas. Tension and trouble follow as Robin has been asked to leave her lover at home. Robin's mother makes it clear that "Kate still doesn't count as family." "An Incident" is a gripping story in which a female student falsely accuses a lesbian teacher of sexual harassment. The story points out that sexual harassment may becoming the McCarthy cry of the 90's. "The Duchess" refers to a bar where another unnamed female protagonist, this one bearing a broken heart, meets and pursues Chloe, a younger woman. The protagonist ends up falling in love with the same type of woman who broke her heart previously.

The most poignant story of them all is "Lillian's Piano." This story within a story centers around a women reminiscing with her current lover about her previous lover, Lillian. Lillian combines Daisy Fay's airiness with Mame's societal bludgeon. As with the main character, the reader too cannot keep from falling in love with Lillian. But as with all great starlets, there must be a fall; in Lillian's case it's back to heterosexuality. The narrator omits this fall from her reminisce, allowing Lillian to keep her faerie charm and lust for life, music, and fellow women, at least in the world of the story.

Mono Lake Stories is an astute collection of modern windows into the lesbian soul. The reader discovers women so naturally constructed that they may be your neighbor, or your friend, or you, and they may be named Chloe or Ginger or Helen or any other name in the world.

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several questions. How can University Presses cut their overhead? How can University Presses upgrade their importance to their home Universities? How can Presses find advantages in licensing their products? How can Presses continue to publish the monograph in an economical form? How can University Presses market and sell their titles better? How can University Presses get out of the business of reaction and into the age of proaction? How can University Presses change their costing and revenue models?

Dark grey clouds were beginning to roll and rumble above the Capitol building at the end of the Scholarly Monograph in Crisis Conference. Rain was inevitable. Parting words at the last luncheon, under participants' breath, were of confusion. The monograph as an entity was probably going to or had already changed itself. The University Press on the other hand was still trying to figure out where to get on board. Keepers of University Presses were beginning to feel like folks who lived in the less-envious areas of the District and had the most complaints about services and safety. And, unfortunately, like those folks, the way to change was not an easy one, requiring a bundle of self-sacrifice and risk-taking. Economics still seemed to be the overriding concern, and, obviously, an accounting was necessary. However, as I sat at Eero Saarinen's impressive terminal, which happened to be in renovation to fulfill the architect's dream, a question kept coming and going like the arriving and departing flights —Have University Presses become statisticians and forgotten their art?