

DESIGN OF A GLOBAL COMPARATIVE SEMINAR CLASS

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by

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Introduction

The idea behind this class was to fill a void in the Global Comparative side of the society-technology (STS) curriculum. The introductory sociology course is part of this curriculum, as it was a society/technology theme at its core. Students interested in sociology normally started with SOC1202, Introduction to Sociology and Cultural Diversity, to create a foundation before taking any other STS classes. The issue with SOC1202 is that it focuses heavily on a comparison between Europe and the Middle East, to teach about social concepts associated with Modernization. This comparison is rather narrow for an introduction to sociology, and also unusual because its examples are not drawn from American society and its social problems, but does create an opportunity for students to take similarly themed classes in other departments, such as HI1321 and HI1322, Introduction to European Social History, and Introduction to European Cultural History, HI3342, Topics in Comparative Civilizations, RE2723, Religions of the West, and perhaps combine them into a sufficiency or prepare them for an IQP trip to an Arab country, such as Morocco. While this is a valuable cultural comparative class, it does not have the breadth to introduce the full range of cultural diversity encountered by WPI students going to various project centers, which are located in Africa, Asia and South America, as well. Further, students have very little exposure to the various non-western countries in other courses, designed to help them think about cultures systematically to prepare them for specific differences they will experience when they leave the United States. For Project centers in countries with unfamiliar cultures, such as Thailand, Namibia, South Africa, Costa Rica and Morocco, an introduction to the history of non-western

countries and cultures would be especially valuable to students who as freshmen are deciding whether they will be among the half of WPI students who complete a project overseas. We proposed to create a new introductory course that addresses a broader range of non-western cultures and deals with the technology and culture in their role is the distribution of wealth and power that can be observed in the world today.

When thinking about how to structure the class, I researched the Freshman Great Problems Seminars that have been added to the course curriculum. The Freshman Seminars have been designed so that freshman students are immediately launched into the active, project-based learning that is characteristic of WPI. These courses focus on group-based work and integration, and allow freshmen to tackle problems and think in a way that they are likely unaccustomed to from most highly structured high schools. They also focus on a “big problem”, an issue with global implications, such as global energy use or food production. I decided to design our class with a similar format, with a heavy emphasis on class discussion and group work. We adopted a “big question” similar to that of the Great Problems seminar, one that addresses society, culture, and technology, and that was to try and explain the disparity in wealth and technology between different societies. Our plan was to have students attempt to explain why there is such a global disparity in the distribution of wealth, power and technology, and to have them decide if technology or culture better explained the social inequities in wealth. Students would work toward an understanding of the roots of global disparities through selected readings, intensive class discussions, and group-based work.

Possibly the most important component of the course was the assigned reading. We wanted the reading to be a contrast, but build on to the type of reading the students were likely to be assigned in high school. Instead of choosing a textbook, we looked for a stimulating book that could be the backbone of the course, and settled on Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is an assessment of the causes of disparities global wealth and technology written by a biologist, rather than a historian, anthropologist, economist or sociologist. It features a somewhat deterministic view of the causes of inequality, which would provide a foil to later readings in the course that would reveal major cultural differences. As part of our emphasis on group work, the students would be divided into small groups and assigned a specific continent/culture to focus on for the course. We carefully chose specific reading for each group, focusing on alternative histories and first-person accounts from people native to the cultures, and books that would challenge the technological determinism of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. The groups would then analyze their first person accounts, and through group writing, critical thinking, integration and oral presentations, seek a new synthesis on how the bio-geographic, socio-economic and politico-cultural factors combined to produce the pattern of inequality evident as one compares nations on different continents today.

Selection of Reading

Guns, Germs and Steel

The selection of *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* as the backbone text of the course was a natural decision. Jared Diamond, the author, is not an anthropologist or sociologist, as one would think, but actually studied physiology, with an emphasis on the ecology and evolution of New Guinea birds. Yali, a New Guinea politician, piqued Diamond's interest in global inequality while he was in the country studying birds. New Guinea was a European colony for over 200 years, and had only begun to move back towards independence under Australian protection. Yali brought up the disparity in wealth and technology between his people and the Europeans, asking, "'Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?'" (p. 14). Diamond realized that this question applied to many other cultures: "People of Eurasian origin... dominate the world in wealth and power... [other people] have been decimated, subjugated, and in some cases even exterminated by European colonialists." (p. 15). Unsatisfied with common "proximate cause" explanations for this inequality, he sets out to answer Yali's question himself, with a deeper look into prehistory focusing the disparity between Eurasia and the rest of the world.

Diamond concedes that European civilizations have a long history of surviving and conquering other civilizations, colonizing much of the world. He states that this European hegemony is not explainable by some common (and rather racist) theories, such as intellectual or genetic superiority of Europeans, but rather, is due to

environmental and geographic differences, which are amplified by positive feedback loops, almost like a “snowball effect”. The process works like such: societies that have suitable plants and animals for domestication are able to move from hunter-gatherer stage to agricultural stage. Agriculture leads to surplus, which allows for the division of labor, the creation of specialties such as craftsmanship and scribes, and for leisure time, which results in invention. The surplus also leads to a larger population, which leads to more people and animals cohabiting, which a biologist knows will lead to the transmission of diseases, forcing surviving communities to develop immunity to certain diseases. These biochemical advantages become especially apparent when two societies meet. The society that has developed immunity to diseases can infect and decimate a population that has no immunity in ways that are not overt warfare. This scenario is seen over and over in history, especially in North and South American Indians after the arrival of the Europeans.

Diamond was not the first person to argue that environmental factors have a decisive influence on human history, but he was the first to lay out the theory in a clear, concise and easily understandable book format, designed for the average reader, not just scholars in specialized fields. Subsequently, the book has been met with both praise and criticism. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 1998, and the Aventis Prize for Best Science Book. It has also been criticized for being ethno and technocentric, and ignoring political and cultural factors. This made the book a natural choice for this class, as it explains the differences between cultures by all but ignoring the influence of culture on the unequal distribution of power and wealth evident today. This view of

culture will allow for a complete juxtaposition with the first-person cultural narratives, that explain the receptiveness of people to westernization in cultural terms, which will be read after the class discussion of *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

Rather than have the students read Diamond's entire book at once, I broke the book up into two sections, and then selected certain chapters that would have the greatest impact on the class. The first section lays out the entire theory of the book, and addresses each specific factor Diamond believes influenced the distribution of wealth and power in the world. They are as follows:

Prologue: Yali's Question- Diamond introduces his thesis, that the differences in societies seen today is due to environmental differences that have been in place for tens of thousands of years, differences he refers to as the "ultimate cause" of global inequality. He states that in this book, he will attempt to answer Yali's question.

Chapter 1: Up to the Starting Line- Diamond considers 13,000 BC to be the last time that humans around the globe were on an equal footing. In this chapter, he gives a short history of humans from 4 million years ago to his starting line.

Chapter 2: A Natural Experiment- Diamond uses the case of the Maoris and Morioris of Polynesia to demonstrate how two societies, originating from the same "stock", can evolve in two completely different directions, one peaceful and one warlike, solely from geographic differences.

Chapter 3: Collision at Cajamarca- This chapter details the conquest of the

Incas by Francisco Pizarro, and shows how only a few hundred Spanish soldiers were able to overthrow an entire empire. Diamond credits this “success” to the proximate causes of guns, germs, and steel (armor).

Chapter 4: Farmer Power- In this chapter, Diamond details how the movement from a hunter-gatherer to agricultural society begins the feedback loop that results in a dominant society. He describes the benefits of plant and animal domestication, and how domestication can lead to larger populations.

Chapter 5: History’s Haves and Have-Nots- Diamond uses carbon dating to identify the major independent sites of food domestication and production, including the Fertile Crescent, China, and Mesoamerica. Food production gave these societies a competitive advantage over other societies.

Chapter 6: To Farm or Not to Farm- In this chapter, Diamond explains how a society “decides” to convert from hunter-gatherer to agricultural. The first farmers were less nourished and had shorter life spans than hunter-gatherers, so there must be important factors that caused this shift.

Chapter 7: How to Make an Almond- This chapter details the mechanics by which plants are selected for domestication and improved through selected breeding. Factors that made a plant easier to domesticate include self-pollination, specific growing season, lack of germinational inhibitors, etc.

Chapter 8: Apples or Indians?- This chapter discusses the rise of food production in the Fertile Crescent, and compares it with that of North and South America. A lack of appropriate founder species in the Americas may have irrecoverably set back these societies in comparison.

Chapter 9: Zebras, Unhappy Marriages and the Anna Karenina Principle- In this chapter, Diamond discusses animal domestication. Some continents lacked animal species appropriate for domestication, such as the zebra. An animal species must meet certain requirements to be domesticatable, such as: they must be herbivorous or omnivorous, rapid growth, breed well in captivity, suitable disposition, etc.

Chapter 10: Spacious Skies and Tilted Axes- The direction of the axis of a continent dictates how well food production will be diffused. Continents with east-west axes, such as Europe and Asia, largely share the same climate, such that plants with similar climactic requirements can diffuse across the continent. Continents with north-south axes can have widely varying climates, such that plants with specific climactic requirements cannot diffuse across the continent.

Chapter 11: The Lethal Gift of Livestock- In this chapter, Diamond explains how the domestication of livestock, and their proximity to people lead to the development of crowd diseases, which societies eventually developed immunity to. Societies without livestock did not develop an immunity to disease, so when they encountered them, they were often devastated.

Chapter 13: Necessity's Mother- In this chapter, Diamond details his theory of how invention happens. He believes that invention often precedes a necessity, and is due to general human creativity.

For the second assigned section of the book, to be read later in the course, I chose the last 5 chapters of the book (15- Yali's People, 16- How China Became Chinese, 17- Speedboat to Polynesia, 18- Hemispheres Collide, and 19- How Africa Became Black). In these chapters, Diamond specifically addresses how his thesis has been demonstrated by the history of Australia/New Guinea, China, Polynesia, North and

South America, and Africa, respectively. These chapters will allow the students to compare Diamond's explanation for where societies are today to the first person cultural accounts they have read, and will be integral in the synthesis of Diamond's thesis and the culture of their assigned continent.

Designing the Class

Guns, Germs and Steel Phase

A concern when choosing *Guns, Germs and Steel* as the backbone text for the course was to keep from overwhelming the students with reading. We intended to complete the reading of *Guns, Germs and Steel* within the first third of the class, about two and a half weeks. There are two typical WPI class formats, a class that meets four times a week for fifty minutes, and a class that meets twice a week for an hour and fifty minutes. By choosing the class format that meets twice a week, this would leave the students with a large section of reading in between classes. With this format, we felt that the students were more likely to get behind in the reading, and would negatively affect the class discussions, as students were more likely to forget what they had read when they had several chapters to focus on. By choosing the class format that meets four times a week, we would be better able to space the reading, and focus each class discussion on one specific topic.

An integral in-class component of the reading would be extensive class discussions. We decided to run the first portion of the class as a seminar. The plan was to have the students complete the reading the night before, and come to class prepared to discuss

the assigned chapter. The discussions would be lead by Pr. Wilkes, but should be largely composed of the students' opinions and thoughts. The students would then be assessed on a class-by-class basis, grading them based on their contributions to the discussion. We felt that the seminar format would allow the students to analyze the book together, using each other to gain a better understanding of the thesis and concepts put forth by the book. The seminar format is preferable to a typical lecture format, as it allows the students to guide the class, discussing concepts that may confuse them and choosing to focus on concepts that most interested them. The guiding of the discussion by the professor is key, as he will be able to clarify and enrich the discussion through his wealth of knowledge on world history.

Assessing the students' understanding of *Guns, Germs and Steel* posed a problem. We thought that a paper, such as a book review, would not be able to encompass the many facets of the book that had been discussed in class. We were worried that key concepts would be missed in a book review, and we felt that it was important that every student have a complete understanding of each of the major concepts in the book before moving onto the next section of the class. Hence, the compromise was a take-home exam consisting of short answer and essay questions would be the most appropriate. By including a short answer section, we could question the students on each of the major concepts from the book, to ensure they had a complete understanding. The take-home format also allowed students who were less confident about certain subjects to go back and reread these sections, so they, too, had a complete understanding of the book. For the major essay of the test, we designed an intriguing and multifaceted question that allowed

the students to demonstrate their understanding of Diamond, and to think creatively and independently. This essay question posed to the students an alternate history of the world, where Mesoamerican Indians developed extensive seafaring technology through their early contact with the Carthaginians. The question posed that, in this alternate history, what would have happened when the Europeans reached the Americas? Would this change the course of history? This question has no wrong answer, and students would be graded on how well they substantiated their argument.

First Group Reading and Paper

For the second section of the class, we wanted to have the students use their newfound understanding of Diamond's thesis and apply it to a historical/cultural account through an individual book review, and an integrated team paper. We divided the students into 5 groups, based on their personal preferences: North America, South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. These groups would work together for the rest of the class on group projects, essays and presentations.

Because of the issues we ran into when trying to choose quality historical/cultural accounts, some of the groups had to approach their book reviews in a different way. The Oceania and half of the Africa team read books that were about a westerner trying to understand a radically different culture, typically by living with the culture. The Oceania team read *My Samoan Chief*, by Fay Calkins, which is about a western woman who marries a Samoan and moves back with him to Samoa. She is confused by the extremely different views on material items and wealth that the Samoans have. Half of the Africa team read *The Forest People*, by Colin Turnbull, a book by an anthropologist who lives among the Pygmy people of Africa. The Pygmy are a group that has actively chosen to

not move from a hunter-gatherer culture to a farming culture, even though all the other groups in the area have. They also have a unique spiritual relationship with the forests where they live. Clearly, culture has played a large role in the history and current circumstances of these cultures. Diamond does not consider culture to be an explanative factor in the difference in wealth and power between groups, specifically, the western authors and the cultures they are writing about. The students were to approach their book review, trying to answer these questions:

What would Diamond have to say about this state of affairs? Would he be able to explain their condition and status in the world using the factors stressed in his thesis? Is your case a good illustration of the principles of *Guns, Germs and Steel* or a counter example? If it is a mixed bag which way do you think the majority of the evidence points?

The North America, South America and Asia teams read books that were more of a new interpretation of history rather than a personal story. The North and South America teams read *1491*, by Charles C. Mann, which is a new interpretation of American Indian history. The author posits that the Native Americans had a much greater influence on the ecology and environment and a much larger population than previously thought. The small, scattered populations that were observed by the Europeans were actually the remnants of larger populations that had been killed off by European diseases after their first arrival. The Asia Team read *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, by Jack Weatherford, which is a historical account of how Genghis Khan was able to conquer much of Asia against all odds. These accounts are more directly comparable to Diamond's interpretation of world history, so they had to be approached in a different way, answering these questions:

If the history of your culture area defies explanation by Diamond's thesis... What is it about your author's factors or interpretation that breaks away from the thesis of *Gun, Germs, and Steel*? How do you think that Diamond would react to them? How do you think he would try to explain your historical account in such a way that would fit his thesis?

After completing their individual book reviews, the groups would meet and integrate their book reviews into one larger paper. At this point, each group would read the Diamond chapter from the second section of the book that regards their continent. They were to include, in the group paper, a review of Diamond's interpretation of their continent. In their book reviews, they were to take the major thesis and concepts from *Guns, Germs and Steel* and apply them to their continent. In the group paper, they now have specific opinions from Diamond tailored directly to their continent, which should allow them to complete a more detailed analysis of Diamond versus their cultural/historical text.

Second Group Reading/Final Paper

For the third phase of the class, we decided to present the groups with a completely different perspective on their continent and culture areas. The teams were assigned a final book to read, this time from a first-person native perspective. The majority of these books were first person biographies written by a native person from their culture, while a few were written by a westerner who had been "recruited" to help write the story, usually through dictation. Through reading these accounts, I wanted the students to understand the worldview of a native of that culture, and to be able to look at Diamond's thesis and claims through the eyes of someone from one of the "have-not" cultures. This will bring a new perspective to the students' synthesis of *Guns, Germs and Steel* and their two

cultural texts, as this is the one thing that Diamond never brings into his materialistic account of world history: culture. More than culture, the second book brings the perspective of people who are from so-called “backwards, have-not” cultures, who, even if they leave, seem to be very proud and respectful of their native culture.

While the students were reading their second book, there would be several opportunities to meet together in class to discuss the reading with their group. As the groups read, they should be moving towards a critical analysis of the culture they studied, synthesizing the assigned readings and relevant materials that came out of in class discussions in preparation for their final paper.

The final paper for the class will be an integration of everything they have learned in the course, including *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, their two cultural texts, any supplemental readings and material from class discussion. The goal of the final paper is to share their growing understanding of non-material world views, non-western religion and the message of the pre-industrial world to the industrial world about its relationship to the Earth, community and sustainability, and finally, a cultural explanation for the inequality evident in the world today. This cultural explanation will then be contrasted with Diamond’s environmentally deterministic explanation for global inequality, and the students will decide which explanation they feel best stands up under scrutiny. They would present their findings in an in-class presentation, incorporating all of their reading and their knowledge on their culture area, to educate the other members of the class on

their specific culture area. This way, everyone will leave the class with a relatively broad knowledge of non-western cultures and values discussed in the class.

The Class

Guns, Germs and Steel

The class began with 15 students. This was an ideal number, because it allowed for manageable but thorough discussions of the readings, a major component of the class. On the first day of class, we had the students make large nametags that we would then use for the first few weeks. The nametags facilitated class discussions, as most of the students did not know each other, and it was difficult for them to address each other during discussion. Likewise, this also made grading them based on participation easier.

After an initial day of introductions and reviewing the syllabus, the students were instructed to begin reading *Guns, Germs and Steel* following the previously decided upon reading schedule. The first class discussion began the next class. The initial class discussion suffered from the common problems encountered in a seminar-style class. Some students did not seem completely prepared, and others seemed reluctant to speak in front of their classmates. Having Pr. Wilkes lead the initial discussions eased the transition into comprehensive class discussions of the assigned reading. We began the class by having Pr. Wilkes summarize the assigned chapters, and then point out particular points in the chapters that would benefit from mutual discussion and analysis. By having a few specific topics to discuss, rather than the whole selection of reading, helped the students to feel more comfortable speaking in front of the class. It would have been preferable to have the students themselves lead the discussion, but the benefits of a small amount of focusing and prompting was quickly seen. After the first few discussion

comments were made, students could react to each others' perceptions, observations and opinions.

As the class discussions developed, students became more noticeably comfortable discussing their opinions on the reading and were much more likely to suggest topics of discussion themselves. The students also adapted to the reading schedule, and on the whole seemed prepared for class discussion, though it is possible that those students who did not do the reading skipped class. Because it was important for each student to contribute to the discussion, we often implemented a strategy of circular discussion, where each student spoke about his or her reaction to the reading before the discussion on the topics began. Certain students seemed to adapt better to the seminar format than others, and as time went on, were the ones to lead the daily discussion. The freshmen on the class appeared to have more difficulty with the seminar format than the upperclassmen in the class. This could have been for a variety of reasons, ranging from simple shyness and a lack of experience to less interest in the class, but by the time we had concluded our discussion of *Guns, Germs and Steel* two and a half weeks into the class, the freshmen seemed to have adapted and were much more willing to participate. Their initial lack of participation may have also been due to a lack of familiarity with the seminar format. We later found that many of the freshmen had never had a seminar-style class before.

Midterm

To test the students' comprehension and critical analysis of the topics and thesis in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the students were assigned a take-home midterm. The midterm was comprised of short answer and essay questions, and was carefully designed to test their general understanding of individual concepts, and also their general understanding and integration of the thesis and class discussions. The first part of the test was comprised of short answer questions, each pertaining to a major topic from one of the assigned chapters. The second part of the tests contained two essay questions. The first was a short essay demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the book, and the second was a longer, critical thinking essay. The second essay allowed the students to think creatively, by applying what they had learned from *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, address a scenario involving an alternate history of European/American Indian first contact.

The students appeared slightly daunted by the length of the midterm, but they were given 24 hours to complete it. The grading of the midterm posed some unique problems. There were a wide range of answers to the short answer questions, and some students failed to correctly interpret the question, leading to answers that were not completely on topic. The essays, especially the second, called for subjective assessment, and we received a wide variety of answers. In order to fairly grade the midterms, we created a list of points the students should have addressed in each of the questions, and graded on a sliding scale with regard to how many of the points were covered. The midterms were generally good, with the average grade being in the mid-B range. As many of the answers to the short answer questions were covered in class discussions, it was apparent that the tests of

students who failed to attend class on a regular basis suffered. This was to be expected, as a good portion of their final grades was based on class attendance and participation.

First Group Reading and Essay

Following the *Guns, Germs and Steel* phase of the class, the students were broken up into 5 groups: North America, South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. These groups would work together for the rest of the class on group projects, essays and presentations. Each group was assigned a historical or cultural account as follows:

North America: *1491*(Charles Mann)/ *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (James Loewen)

South America: *1491*(Charles Mann)

Asia: *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (Jack Weatherford)/*When China Ruled the Seas* (Louise Levathes)

Oceania: *My Samoan Chief* (Fay Calkins)

Africa: *Things Fall Apart & African Atlas* (Chinua Achebe)/*The Forest People* (Colin Turnbull)

We immediately ran into some difficulty because several of the students had failed to obtain their assigned text when instructed to do so. WPI's seven week terms require careful planning and adherence to a strict schedule to cover everything one would like to cover in a class. Since some students did not have their books yet, we had to delay the pace of the class for a few days. Additionally, two new students entered the class towards

the end of the *Guns, Germs and Steel* phase, and accommodations had to be made to catch them up.

The students were directed to read their historical and cultural texts through the lens of *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Diamond does not consider culture to be an important explanatory factor in the difference in wealth and power between groups of people, but as the students would soon see while reading, their cultures often defied explanation solely by the variables stressed by Diamond's thesis. Clearly, culture and recent history has played a larger role in the history and current circumstances of these cultures than Diamond would care to admit. While the students were reading their cultural texts, class discussion involved addressing their overall feelings and reaction to *Guns, Germs and Steel* on a whole. Additionally, their reactions to the books they were currently reading were voiced in class through discussions.

The students' first assignment writing assignment was to write an individual reaction review of their assigned book. From their book reviews, it seemed that the books largely engaged the students, and most enjoyed reading them. A few students failed to critically analyze the books, and instead wrote book summaries, but on the whole the book reviews were thorough and insightful. After the individual book reviews completed, the groups exchanged book reviews, and began to integrate them into one larger paper. During this phase, each group was assigned the chapter of *Guns, Germs and Steel* where Diamond specifically addresses how his thesis has been demonstrated by the history of their

culture area: Australia/New Guinea, China, Polynesia, North and South America, and Africa.

The students were given a week to read and analyze the assigned Diamond chapter, and to integrate their individual book reviews into a comprehensive group essay. On the day their group essays were due, each group gave a presentation on their cultural area, incorporating the individual books and comparing and contrasting their relationship to Diamond's thesis. The students used different forms of media to enrich their presentations, including PowerPoint presentations and handouts with major points and pertinent graphics. Three groups did an admirable job integrating their separate books and sharing their combined knowledge on their cultural area with the rest of the class, but two groups' presentations were notably lacking. It was at this point, though, that we saw that some members of groups were not equally contributing to the group projects. This became an ongoing problem, as the only recourse we had was to lower their grades, which did not spur them to participate more fully. This is one of the major issues faced in a group-based course strategy, and there is little that can be done to motivate a student who does not care what their final grade will be, and is a problem to which we shall return.

Second Group Reading/Final Paper

In the third phase of the class, the students were assigned first person narratives that would present a completely different perspective on their continent and culture areas, contrasting with their previous readings. Our hope was that, through reading these first person narratives, the students would be able to understand the worldview of a native of their culture area, and to be able to look at Diamond's thesis and claims through the eyes of someone from one of the less technologically advanced cultures. The second book brings the perspective of people who are from so-called "backwards, have-not" cultures, who, even if they leave, seem to be very proud of their native culture. We hoped that the students would see the dichotomy of an "outsiders" objective view of their cultural area and a native's greatly different subjective view. The students were given time to read their first person narratives, which were as follows:

North America: *Neither Dog nor Wolf* (Kent Nerburn)

South America: *Wizard of the Upper Amazon* (F. Bruce Lamb)/*The Shaman's Apprentice* (Mark Plotkin)

Asia: *Leaving Mother Lake* (Yang Erche Namu, Christine Mathieu)

Oceania: *The White Headhunter* (Nigel Randell)

Africa: *Of Water and the Spirit* (Malidoma Patrice)

We allowed the groups to meet together in class several times to discuss the reading with one another, and to begin to contrast the first person account with the previous readings. As the groups read, they worked on moving towards a critical analysis of the culture they studied, synthesizing the assigned readings and relevant materials that came out of in

class discussions in preparation for their final paper. Students picked up on what we had hoped, that the native often does not see that there is anything “wrong” with their culture and people, the same cultures that Diamond and western social scientists are quick to brand as underdeveloped.

Unfortunately, due to delays earlier in the course, the final phase was more rushed than we would have liked. This is another problem commonly faced by classes that require a complete integration of all the class material to produce a final product, and it was the same problem that afflicted the previous incarnation of this class, the Global Inequality Debate. Although we did improve the end-of-course integration this time, it would have been better if more time had been dedicated to this phase.

The goal of the final paper was to share material about non-material world views, religion and the message of the pre-industrial world to the industrial world about its relationship to the Earth, community and sustainability, and finally, provide a cultural explanation for the inequality evident in the world today to balance with Diamond’s materialistic perspective. This cultural explanation would then be contrasted with Diamond’s environmentally deterministic explanation for global inequality, and the students would decide which explanation they feel best stands up under scrutiny as they work toward a synthesis between them. Their conclusions would be delivered in the form of a final group paper, and an in-class presentation on their findings.

The groups had varying levels of difficulty with the complex integration task that they undertook, and also had varying levels of success with creating solid, well-supported conclusions. One group stood out as having achieved this admirably, Group Asia. It is not clear if this was due more to the assigned material or the leadership of an upperclassman in the group. The goal of the class was to be consciousness-raising rather than for the students to display a mastery of any specific society or historical period in detail. In spite of difficulties, I believe each student left the class with a considerably enhanced knowledge of non-western cultures and values, exposure to which they would have not received in any other class at WPI.

Analysis of the Class

Reactions to Diamond

There were a variety of responses to the use of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* as the core text for this course. Some students had previously read the book in AP history in high school, and so they had a familiarity with the subject matter, while other students were new to *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. The beauty of *Guns, Germs and Steel* is that it is an accessible text, one that is easy to understand regardless of who is reading it. This point was of no contention, but certain, more perceptive students sometimes found the repeated discussion of the book to be repetitive and monotonous. This view was largely espoused by upperclassmen, who may have had a much easier time integrating the thesis and concepts put forth in *Gun, Germs and Steel* than the freshmen. This caused a lag in discussions, also, as many of the topics put forth were brought up by upperclassmen. This is a problem that is difficult to solve in a mixed-level class, as it will undoubtedly always take the freshmen more time to integrate concepts than upperclassmen, leaving the upperclassmen bored. One solution would be to restrict admission to the class to freshmen, but then we would lose the insights the upperclassmen gave to the discussions and presentations.

One area I noticed was lacking was criticism of Diamond. The students seemed completely unaware that there were even different theories regarding global inequality, and seemed to accept Diamond's thesis outright, with little to no criticism. This was unusual, as most people are aware that the classical view on the subject is that culture has played a large part in determining the economic status of a group today, as opposed to

Diamond's biological view. This lack of seemingly normal criticism may reflect either the WPI mindset, where science is the answer to everything, or changes in high school curriculums to include new ideas, such as a biological and geographical explanation for current global inequality.

Another thing the students failed to pick up on is how deterministic Diamond's argument is. Diamond believes that the fates of groups of people were determined long ago, by largely geographical factors, and that there was basically nothing these people could do to change their historical course. Fortunately, one of the purposes of the second half of the class is to lead the students to a critical understanding of Diamond, and subsequently they were introduced to the opinion that Diamond is overly deterministic. I feel, though, without being guided, the students would have been more than happy to accept Diamond's thesis as irreproachable fact.

Analysis of the Midterm

I believe that the midterm was an excellent assessment of the student's understanding of *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Some students were displeased with their grades, but I feel that their grades greatly reflected not only their attendance of the class, but also their level of critical participation in class discussions. Students who regularly attended class but failed to make critical contributions to the class discussion generally scored lower than those who were more engaged in the discussion. In a seminar-style class, this is the ideal type of assessment, as it not only assesses whether the students have read the material, but how well they have been engaging in a critical analysis of the material.

Some criticism of the midterm was well founded, though. Certain students did not like the alternative history essay question, as they found our interpretation of the scenario too narrow. These same students may have failed to realize, though that they were not graded on whether or not they answered the question “correctly”, but solely on how well they were able to back up their argument.

Analysis of Second Phase of the Course (As the two parts of the second phase of the class were very similar, it would be best to analyze them together)

The second phase of the class ran less smoothly than the first. This was to be expected, as this was the more “experimental” portion of the class. First, we used texts that we had never before presented to a class, so we were unsure of what the initial reaction to them would be. Every care was taken in selecting books that would be considered easily readable and informative. The books, on their own, seemed to well received, it was in the integration where groups ran into trouble. One of the main problems was an uneven distribution of work between members of a group. Several groups had at least one member who had inconsistent attendance and participation in the first phase of the class, and their lack of engagement followed through to the second phase of the class. This would have not been as big of an issue in a lecture-style class, but since the majority of the assignments were group-based, those groups with unproductive members suffered. This was especially evident in the South America and North America groups, which were left with two and one working individuals, respectively. This sort of problem is nearly

impossible to control for, though, short of identifying these individuals early and either equally distributing them throughout the groups, or forming them into their own group, neither of which are ideal.

Another problem stemmed from the in-class presentations. The quality of these presentations varied greatly, from interactive and informative multimedia presentations to reading straight off a piece of paper. While these differences were reflected in their grades, it was unfortunate that some of the presentations were lacking. A possible solution would be to give more specific criteria for the project, which would result in more detailed assignments. This solution would only work if the cause of the problematic presentations was a lack of direction in the assignment, not just a sign of a lack of interest in the group.

A third problem was encountered during the final period of integration and synthesis immediately preceding the final paper. Due to issues at the beginning of the course, such as late registration of two students, the pace of the course was delayed. This delay was most clearly felt in the last portion of the class, as it was more rushed than we would have liked. This is a problem that the previous iteration of this class faced, a rush to integrate that the end. This was one of the major failings of the previous course, and continued to be problematic in this course. The integration is possibly the most important part of the course, as it brings together seemingly unconnected aspects of the class to form a “bigger picture” of global inequity. Without proper synthesis of all the aspects of the class, the students fail to reach a complete and thorough understanding of non-western cultures and

values. If this class is to continue, and to be successful, more attention must be paid to reserving enough class time for the final synthesis

Future of the Class

I would have to say that this course was moderately successful. It was a great improvement on the previous iteration of the class, as we managed to smooth out some of the previous problems we faced. Unfortunately, we also ran into some of the same issues, and by changing the format of the class, we also created some new problems. A major source of issues was the group-based work format, which left some students feeling like they had more than their fair share of the work. This is significant; because if a student feels overworked and displeased with their group, they lose all the potential benefits that group-work has, such as a sharing of the work load and a feeling of group camaraderie. This is a problem with few solutions, and if this class was to continue as is, is likely to also be an issue in the future.

Another major issue with the class was the combination of freshmen and upperclassmen. The upperclassmen had largely taken previous STS classes, and such, they had a familiarity with the topics and issues covered in this class. For the freshmen, though, this was their first exposure to an STS class. The upperclassmen sometimes felt weighed down by the freshmen, as they had a harder time reaching a critical understanding of the assignments, and were sometimes bored by the repetitive class discussions. The freshmen, on the other hand, may have felt intimidated by the upperclassmen, who were fully willing to engage in class discussion from the first day, and may have also been intimidated by the seminar-style class. I believe that if this class were to be offered again

in the future, it would have to be restricted to either only upperclassmen or only freshmen. The mixture does not create a conducive learning environment for either group.

All in all, I believe that this class was an excellent experiment, and we learned much about the dynamics of a seminar-style class from both the freshmen and upperclassmen perspective. I feel, though, that this class does not have a place in the freshmen curriculum, as it may require too much synthesis and integration of unlike materials. This course would be better served as an upperclassmen course, one that is taken following an introductory STS class. The upperclassmen seemed more engaged, and better able to participate in discussion and synthesized the material. This class might make an ideal background course for students who will be going overseas to non-European countries, as it leaves them with a comprehensive knowledge and appreciation of non-western cultures and values, something they are unlikely to receive from any other class.