

THE BIOLOGY OF HISTORY

Understanding Human History

An Analysis Including Effects of Geography and Differential Evolution

By Michael H. Hart

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Reviewed by Nelson Rosit

A quarter century ago the great *Annaliste* Fernand Braudel wrote: "To explain how the West extended its power over the rest of the world between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries is the essential problem of the history of the modern world."¹ In *Understanding Human History* (UHH), Michael Hart proposes a bold evolutionary theory that not only resolves Braudel's "problem," but offers an explanation for a myriad of other historical and contemporary issues.

Michael H. Hart was born in 1932 to a Jewish family in New York. He received a Ph.D. in astronomy from Princeton University and pursued a career as a teacher and researcher in the physical sciences. Today he is probably best known as a historian and social commentator.² In his latest book he interprets world history through the lens of genes and environment. These modes of inquiry are often closely related because over time selective pressures from the environment steer evolution.

Hart goes directly to his argument on page one by criticizing past world histories for failing adequately to address causation (though he does not use that term). Historians know, for example, that scientific and technological advances produce wealth and power for those societies that create or embrace them. These advances are the products of human intelligence. While the benefits of science and technology seem manifest, only some cultures have been able to utilize them because

¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, vol. I, *The Wheels of Commerce* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 134.

² Hart's *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1978) was widely read and suggests that great men were the most important agents of history. His 1996 presentation at the American Renaissance conference advocated a racial partition of the United States.

only some groups have the intelligence to do so. Hart's basic thesis is that these differences in average intelligence are a major, yet overlooked, factor in history.

Average group intelligence is not randomly distributed. Group differences are the result of adaptations to different environments. "[G]roups that resided for many millennia in regions with cold winters gradually—through the process of natural selection—evolved higher average intelligence than groups living in milder climates" (UHH, p. 2). While he writes of group differences Hart does not shy away from using the term race. In fact he devotes several chapters to establishing the reality of race and racial differences in appearance, intelligence, and behavior. This book is about historical agency. It does not address the policy implications that may arise from these lessons from history.

In his introduction the author poses eight major, yet specific, historical questions. One question is: Why, after tens of thousands of years as hunter-gathers, did three groups of *Homo sapiens* independently develop agriculture within a few thousand years of each other? This question will be considered below

Hart's work appears to be both seminal and synthetic. His writing is informed by the research of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, J. Philippe Rushton, and Richard Lynn and Tatu Vanhanen, among others.³ But the author whose presence looms largest in *Understanding Human History* is probably Jared Diamond. In fact, Hart's book can be viewed as an answer to Diamond's strict environmental interpretation of world history articulated in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.⁴ It

³ Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), provides evidence of the importance of intelligence in determining an individual's socio-economic success. J. Philippe Rushton, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1995), discusses racial differences in intelligence and behavior. Richard Lynn and Tatu Vanhanen, *IQ and the Wealth of Nations* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), documents the correlation between economic development and average group intelligence. Arthur Jensen, Edward O Wilson, and L. L. Cavavalli-Sforza also contribute to Hart's understanding. Readers may also suspect the influence of British anthropologist Arthur Keith (Chapter 6, "Bands, and the Dual Code of Morality") though Hart does not acknowledge Keith and may not be aware of his contributions.

⁴ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

may surprise some that Hart accepts many of Diamond's environmental theories. Hart, however, radically departs from the rigid egalitarianism of Diamond that concedes only a slight cognitive advantage to New Guinea tribesmen.⁵

Professor Hart uses his broad knowledge to incorporate evolutionary biology, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and geography into his study of history. He correctly believes that one must understand human prehistory to understand human history. About a third of the book deals with prehistory.⁶ To simplify Hart's theory we can say that the environment of the African savannah, the birthplace of man, has produced a *Homo sapiens* with an average IQ of approximately 70; the middle latitudes of, say, Mesoamerica and North Africa, produced an average IQ of 85–90, while the northern latitudes of Europe and Asia produced an average IQ of 100.

So why did agriculture, and thus civilization, originate in Anatolia, the Levant, and Mesopotamia and not with the higher IQ peoples to the north? Endorsing Diamond's work, Hart believes the natural environment is an important agent of human history. The Neolithic Revolution began 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent because that region had a favorable climate and native flora and fauna most conducive to domestication. But even in a favorable natural environment it takes an average group IQ of 85–90 to originate farming. This is why the agricultural revolution occurred circa 8,000 BCE and not 48,000 BCE. At the earlier date no group of humans had sufficient intelligence to conceive of domestication of plants and animals.⁷

Hart's theory of history takes into account both environmental and genetic explanations, turning the nature versus nurture debate into a false dichotomy. He does not discount culture as an explanatory factor

⁵ Diamond writes that he finds racism "loathsome," then goes on to state that he believes New Guineans are "on the average more intelligent" than Europeans and Americans (*Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 20).

⁶ Traditional historiography was based almost entirely on written texts, thus history was thought to begin with the invention of writing. Today historians use many non-textual sources: material artifacts such as artistic creations and architectural monuments, audio/visuals, even manmade landscapes to study the past. This has helped to blur the distinction between prehistory and history and historiography and archaeology.

⁷ Hart sees agriculture based on rice developing independently in China about 9,000 years ago. In Mesoamerica farming based on maize began about 6,000 years ago.

either, but he characterizes it as generally “of lesser importance,” (UHH, p. 171). Cultural change, for example, was a major reason for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Hart’s objective is to add innate group intelligence to environmental and cultural factors as a causal agent of history. The charge of determinism is hard to make against Hart, whereas Diamond, whose theory of world history rests almost entirely on the effects of geography and the natural environment, leaves himself open for such criticism.

Addressing Braudel’s historical problem of European ascendancy, Hart notes that (except for his own Ashkenazi Jews) North Asians and Europeans are the two most intelligent peoples on earth. In early modern times China had a huge empire densely populated by people of relatively high average intelligence. Yet, beginning in the fifteenth century, Europeans came to dominate the world for half a millennium. Why did the East fall so far behind Europe?

Hart offers two explanations.

One is geographic and environmental. Instead of Europe’s islands and peninsulas and maritime tradition, China is a solid continental land mass more economically self-sufficient, more politically and culturally united than Europe. Europe’s divisions led to competition and conflict, but also progress (UHH, p. 332).

The second factor was that while North Asians may have a slightly higher average intelligence they lack the genius of Europeans: “There were no Chinese equivalents to Copernicus or Newton. Nor were there any Chinese parallels to Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven; not to Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci; nor to Columbus or Magellan” (UHH, p. 266). The implication is that average group intelligence, or general intelligence, as measured by IQ tests, can not account for all individual or collective success. Societies need a few extraordinary individuals, iconoclastic geniuses, who propel progress. For the vast majority, intelligence needs to be coupled with a sense of social order and self discipline for societies to prosper.⁸

⁸ According to Herrnstein and Murray even when controlling for IQ American Whites tend to lead more ordered lives than American Blacks. They are less likely to be incarcerated and less likely to produce illegitimate children. The authors conclude that the extent that these differences in behavior are genetic or cultural is not known (*The Bell Curve*, Chapter 14, “Ethnic Inequalities in Relation to IQ,” 317–40). Hart, on the other hand, makes an explicit case for innate racial differences in behavior as well as intelligence. See UHH, Chapter 18, “Behavior Differences Between the

While North Asians may lack the individual genius of Europeans, they have been great conquerors and rulers. Hart's research finds the origins of the Ottoman, Mughal, and Manchu dynasties within this racial group. The common thread uniting these empires was a founding population of Altaics, a northern Mongolian people. Cold selected for intelligence, the ancient Altaics were composed of three main branches: the Turkic in the west, the Munchu/Tungus in the east, and the Mongols in the center. For over a thousand years these people sallied north, south, east, and west to conquer.

According to Hart, Altaics constituted the original ethnic core of the Huns (maybe), Bulgars, and Seljuk and Ottoman Turks. Genghis and Kublai Khan were Mongol/Altaic. Tamerlane was of Turkic/Altaic descent. "Babar (1483–1530) who was a descendant of both Tamerlane (on his father's side) and Genghis Khan (on his mother's side)" established the Mughal Empire that eventually included most of India.⁹ The Tunusic Manchus originated in Manchuria and conquered China in the seventeenth century. Over the centuries Altaic rulers largely assimilated ethnically and culturally with their subject peoples.

The idea of Altaic peoples creating mighty empires from east-central Europe to the Yellow Sea and from Siberia to the Arabian Sea is interesting. I do not believe the Altaic hypothesis originated with Hart, but he does not attribute it to anyone else. Unfortunately, there are only six endnotes in Chapter 39, "Northern Asia." None of the notes pertain to the Altaics, so the reader cannot check the author's sources. A lack of citations is one of several deficiencies in *Understanding Human History*.

As erudite and intelligent as Hart is he lacks formal training in historiography and geography, and it sometimes shows in his writing. A couple of examples will suffice to make this point. Writing about World War I, Hart claims, "the defensive power of machine guns had been demonstrated fifty years earlier, during the American Civil War." While a machine gun prototype, the Gatling gun, existed at the time of the Civil War, this early version was not a factor in that conflict.¹⁰ Another example is Hart's use of political units as geographic

Races," 126–32.

⁹ The modern Bulgarians are a south Slavic people. The Turks, originally a Mongol group, "became a Mongoloid-Caucasoid hybrid" people (UHH, 292–93, 296).

¹⁰ The source Hart cites for his statement on the use of machine gun during the

terms. Thus, “[m]aize was introduced into the eastern USA” about 1,000 AD (UHH, p. 428). Of course eastern North America existed at the beginning of the first millennium CE; the United States did not. Some readers may consider such mistakes as minor, but they undermine the book’s credibility. Because he is challenging orthodoxy, Hart needs all the accurate citations, authoritative sources, and correct terminology he can muster.

Another criticism that can be made of *Understanding Human History* is a lack of focus. Parts of the book read like the review notes for a World Civilizations 101 course. Hart tries to encompass the entire history of the world to sustain his thesis, yet much of the information does not directly support his theories. For instance, the relevance of the Union of Kalmar (p. 322) to Hart’s general thesis is not clear. A more tightly structured, closely argued, and carefully documented book would have been more effective.

Hart has something important to say. He has been able to stretch the theory of evolution to encompass both natural history and human history. He writes what is called Big History. He works with bold theoretical strokes. This is both a strength and a weakness of the book. Big Histories are often more interesting than narrowly focused and meticulously documented monographs. They also involve much speculation. Ideally, a mega-history is the product of a senior scholar who has spent his career writing those monographs that serve as the building blocks for his *magnum opus*.

Thus despite some weaknesses, Hart’s book makes several valid and very important points. Historiography often neglects causality. Traditional cultural explanations for a civilization’s success or failure beg the question: How did cultural success or failure arise? Do certain societies, by chance, win the cultural lottery by hitting upon the right combination of values and institutions?

No doubt one reason for the acclaim accorded Diamond’s two most recent books is that they deal with the issue of agency and give plausible, though flawed, explanations for how world history unfolded as

Civil War was Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962). No page number is given. A journalist turned writer of popular histories, Tuchman’s work would certainly not be considered the best source to document such a claim. In her defense, however, this reviewer could find no mention in her book of machine gun use during the American Civil War.

it did.¹¹ Diamond states that he wrote *Guns, Germs and Steel* specifically to thwart biological arguments such as those raised by Hart. Diamond has egalitarianism, the ideological orthodoxy of our age, on his side. Yet, the idea that human genetic variation has broad application to the study of human history refuses to die.

Hart's book is directed, at least in part, at changing historiography, the way history is researched and written. On the back cover of the paperback edition of *Understanding Human History*, Henry Harpending, a professor of anthropology at the University of Utah, states: "[Hart's] arguments are compelling, and no honest historian or social scientist will be able to ignore them."

Unfortunately, in the short term I think Hart's book will be largely ignored by both academic and popular historians. If I were a Cynic like Diogenes, I might say that there simply are no honest historians today, or perhaps the problem is a lack of courage. We have already touched upon the reasons why historians will ignore this book: Hart is not "one of them," an academic historian, and certain shortcomings in form and content will be used to dismiss his work. The main reason the book will be neglected is, of course, the taboo against the study of racial differences. To violate this taboo is a career ender. Just ask James Watson. Do not look for reviews of *Understanding Human History* in the *Journal of American History* or the *American Historical Review*, in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.

The prospect of Hart having an immediate influence on the field of history is slight. Only revolutionary changes, not just within the discipline of history, but within society as a whole, would lead to wide acceptance of Hart's work. There are, perhaps, some reasons to believe that in the future *Understanding Human History* could be seen as a formative work, a bit rough, but a useful prototype for incorporating human evolutionary biology and psychology into historiography.

The influence of the most radical of the so called postmodernists and deconstructionists (i.e., subjective, antiscientific leftists) has waned over the past decade. Meanwhile, as our knowledge of human genetics increases, it is likely that recognition of race-based differences in average intelligence and behavior will also increase. These factors, along with the long-term trend toward an interdisciplinary approach

¹¹ Jared Diamond's most recent book, another global environmental history, is *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005).

to historiography, will lead to greater influence for the social and natural sciences in the study of history. If these forces converge with a greater sense of racial/cultural identity among Western scholars, then Hart's book will be seen as a significant contribution to understanding human history.

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