Honors Collegium 152/Geography 153/Anthropology 158 (5 units)

Past Societies, and Their Lessons for Our Own Future

Instructor: Jared Diamond, Professor of Geography and of Environmental Health Sciences

Jared Diamond is Professor of Geography, Public Health, and Physiology at UCLA. His six best-selling books Guns, Germs, and Steel, Why Is Sex Fun?, The Third Chimpanzee, Collapse, The World until Yesterday, and Upheaval have won a Pulitzer Prize, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and (twice) Britain’s Science Book Prize. His many other awards include the National Medal of Science, the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement, and three UCLA teaching awards. For the last 40 years he worked especially on biological membranes and on New Guinea birds. He has now shifted his focus to environmental history.

NOTE: THERE IS AN ENROLLMENT RESTRICTION FOR THIS COURSE (SEE BELOW).

Course Summary

Subject of the course: leadership! Individual leaders seem to be important, and to make a difference for better or for worse, in many different contexts. Surely, 20th-century history would have turned out differently if Adolph Hitler, or (conversely) if Winston Churchill, hadn’t existed? Today, Donald Trump seems to be making a big difference – but American politics were already become polarized before him; would the condition of the U.S. now really be much different if Trump had by chance died at age 12?

Did Bill Gates play a unique role in the development of technology? Or, were there many other business leaders equally capable of developing personal computers, whom Gates just happened to beat out?

UCLA sports fans know better than students of any other American college the importance of a great coach. No other men’s basketball coach, at UCLA or elsewhere, has ever approached John Wooden’s unbroken sequences of consecutive victories and NCAA championships. No women’s gymnastic coach has ever approached the record of our recently retired Coach Miss Val’s national championships. Why, then, does firing a college or professional coach with a losing record, at UCLA as at other teams, rarely result in a new coach with a better record?
The history of religion is marked by charismatic founders of world religions. If Christ hadn’t been born in Bethlehem in 4 BC, or if Mohammed hadn’t been born in Mecca around AD 570, would some other prophets born around then and there had founded other world religions? Was something going on then in the Roman Empire, or in the Arabian Peninsula, that was just waiting for some prophet to take advantage?

All of these questions have for a long time been debated endlessly, without resolution. Could newly developed methods of analysis now make it possible to obtain some answers? This course will discuss historical, business, sports, and religious leaders in light of these new methods.

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**Format of the course**

There are four components:

1. **Lectures.** One per week, Tuesdays from January 7 to March 10, 1:00 – 2:50 P.M., by Jared Diamond. Room: Bunche Hall A163, in the Palm Court, one level below ground level.  

2. **Discussion sections.** One two-hour meeting per week, with options of two different meeting times (Thursdays from 10:00 A.M. to 11:50 A.M., and from 1:00 to 2:50 P.M.), led by Marcus Thomson. Each student will enroll in one of these two options and will remain in the same section for the whole course. The section meetings will be devoted to a discussion of the lecture and the readings for that week.

3. **Readings.** Each week, the readings will be copied onto the password-protected course website for enrolled students. The readings are taken from books and articles. They are to be read for their overall content, rather than for details.

4. **Weekly mini-papers.** Each week, each student will write and submit by 7:00 PM Monday night a mini-paper of about one page, discussing the assigned reading for that week.

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**Lecture Schedule**

**Lecture 1, January 7.** Introduction. Historical leaders.

**Lecture 2, January 14.** Historical leaders, continued. Natural experiments of history.

**Lecture 3, January 21.** Business leaders.

**Lecture 4, January 28.** Business leaders, continued. Natural experiments of business.

Lecture 6, February 11. Genghis Khan, and history’s greatest land empire.

Lecture 7, February 18. Great coaches.

Lecture 8, February 25. Fire the coach!: What actually happens when a coach is fired because of a losing record?

Lecture 9, March 3. Religious prophets in the 19th-century USA.


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**Grading**

*Grading* will be based on three components:

(a) Participation in the Tuesday class discussion and in the weekly small-group discussions; active participation in the discussion, knowledge, and insight will be assessed; for each week’s discussion group, do the assigned reading, and prepare in advance and hand in on Monday a short (e.g., one-page) commentary and summary of the assigned reading; approximately 40% weight.

(b) A mid-term exam on February 4, lasting 2 hours, and including both essay questions and some short specific questions; approximately 30% weight.

(c) A final exam lasting 3 hours, on a date in finals week in June at the time that UCLA assigns for all Tuesday 1:00 – 2:50 classes. Students who did especially well on the midterm may, if they prefer and with the teaching fellow’s approval, replace the final exam with a paper on a course-related topic of their own choice; approximately 30% weight.

The dates of the midterm and final exams are fixed. If a student misses an exam for any reason, it is not possible to take a make-up exam. We have no control over the date and time of the final exam, which is presently unknown and will be set by the registrar’s office. Students must be willing to take the final exam on whichever date during finals week the registrar chooses for the exam.

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**Expectations of students.** We expect students:
• to attend all lectures, and to contribute to discussion during the lectures (note: the lectures and readings cover different aspects of societies, so one is not a substitute for the other). In particular, attendance at the first two lectures is mandatory; a student who misses either of those two lectures for any reason may not continue the course;

• to attend all meetings of the discussion section in which you are enrolled, and to participate;

• to do all of the reading; and

• to do all of the mini-papers.

The mini-papers and midterm and final papers must be your own work, and must not be copied or drawn substantially from the work of someone else, from a website, or from another source. UCLA official policy is as follows: According to the UCLA Code of Conduct (Sec. 102.01c) “Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, the use of another's words or ideas as if they were one's own; including, but not limited to, representing, either with the intent to deceive or by the omission of the true source, part of or an entire work produced by someone other than the student, obtained by purchase or otherwise, as the student's original work; or, representing the identifiable but altered ideas, data or writing of another person as if those ideas, data or writing were the student's original work.”

Students should be aware that the weekly reading, lectures, mini-papers, and discussions add up to a significant work load, and that this course is appropriate only for students confident that they will be able to keep up with the load.

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**Admission to the course**

About 50 students will be admitted to the course. Please send me (jdi mond@geog.ucla.edu) a short account (one page is enough) about yourself, your background, your interests, where you have spent your life, what parts of the world you are familiar with, and your major and career plans if you have decided (it’s perfectly OK to say that you are undecided). Mention why you want to take this course. Include your name, year, and student ID number. When you e-mail your page to me, please make sure that you also cc your essay to the course TA Scott Lydon (s.lydon@ucla.edu), and indicate your preferred choice among the two course discussion sections. When you submit your essay, please do not send it as an attachment.