The Natural and Cultural Foundations of Civilizations (MBC 700)

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Fall 2020
Wednesdays 1:00-4:00

This seminar will focus on a range of proposals about the natural and cultural foundations of civilizations taking inspiration from such fields as archaeology, anthropology, cognitive science, genetics, geography, natural history, and cultural evolution. In the course of the semester, we will explore such questions as:

What are the biological relationships between the various human groups around the world and how did they come to be as they are?

Are we the only cultural species?

Why after a quarter million years of its evolution did our species begin to produce vastly greater numbers of artifacts over roughly the last 50,000 years?

Why after nearly 300,000 years of its evolution did members of our species begin to live in large settlements over just the last 10,000 years or so?

How did these new living arrangements change our species biologically and culturally (i.e., politically, militarily, economically, religiously, educationally, and more)?

Why did some human groups (e.g., in the Middle East) develop agriculture, while others (e.g., aboriginal Australians) did not?

Why were writing systems invented (when they were invented)? How do they evolve and what advantages do they contribute to human groups?

This interdisciplinary seminar is sweeping in its scope and will explore both the natural and the cultural roots of human civilizations. The natural roots in question concern both the evolution of the kinds of minds we possess and the ecological and geographical circumstances in which various human groups are and have been situated. The cultural roots concern the sorts of technological, behavioral, social, institutional, and intellectual innovations that human groups invent, retain, and transmit. We shall examine the fundamental forces shaping human minds and, later, human societies across the entire history of our species from the divergence of our lineage from that of chimpanzees to the modern age.
Major debates have swirled around these matters for centuries, and we shall largely (though not exclusively) focus on the new contributions of various sciences for understanding our species’ past and its accomplishments. Virtually all the readings will come from the following six books:


Stephen Oppenheimer, *Out of Eden: The Peopling of the World*

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*

James Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*

Michael Cook, *A Brief History of the Human Race*


Grading: Grades will be based on a student’s term paper and on participation and presentations on readings in the seminar sessions.