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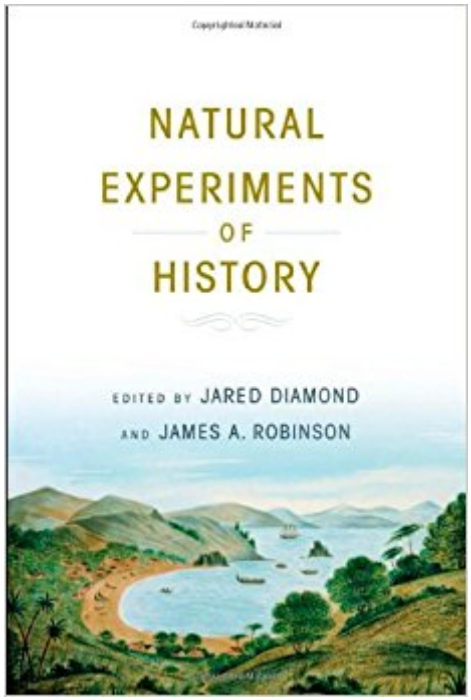
Natural Experiments Of History



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Synopsis

Some central questions in the natural and social sciences can’t be answered by controlled laboratory experiments, often considered to be the hallmark of the scientific method. This impossibility holds for any science concerned with the past. In addition, many manipulative experiments, while possible, would be considered immoral or illegal. One has to devise other methods of observing, describing, and explaining the world.In the historical disciplines, a fruitful approach has been to use natural experiments or the comparative method. This book consists of eight comparative studies drawn from history, archeology, economics, economic history, geography, and political science. The studies cover a spectrum of approaches, ranging from a non-quantitative narrative style in the early chapters to quantitative statistical analyses in the later chapters. The studies range from a simple two-way comparison of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share the island of Hispaniola, to comparisons of 81 Pacific islands and 233 areas of India. The societies discussed are contemporary ones, literate societies of recent centuries, and non-literate past societies. Geographically, they include the United States, Mexico, Brazil, western Europe, tropical Africa, India, Siberia, Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific islands.In an Afterword, the editors discuss how to cope with methodological problems common to these and other natural experiments of history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an interesting book on theme of comparative analysis in historical studies. There are 7

chapters describing specific comparative studies; Patrick Kirch on the evolution of Polynesian societies, James Belich on frontier societies, Stephen Haber on the development of banking systems in selected Western Hemisphere nations, Jared Diamond on Haiti vs the Dominican Republic and Pacific island societies, Nathan Nunn on the long term effects of the African slave trade, Banerjee and Iyer on the long term consequences of Indian colonial land tenure systems, and Acemoglu et al on the effects of the Napoleonic conquest of parts of Germany. Most of these chapters are summaries of previously published research. There are essentially 2 major themes. One, exemplified in the chapters by Belich and Acemoglu et al,is an effort to find common underlying structures by use of comparisons. A second, and generally more robust theme, is use of comparisons is to identify contingent features that result in marked differences in present day outcomes. In his comparison of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and what led to the marked differences in present day economic status, for example, Diamond points to differences in geography and ecology but also to marked differences in the behavior of the 2 major 20th century dictators, Duvalier and Trujillo.The chapters vary somewhat in quality. Chapters by Kirch and Belich are really brief summaries of a large body of prior work. They are interesting but insufficiently detailed though they have excellent bibliographies. The Nunn chapter is most interesting part of this book. Nunn uses a careful accounting of the regional distribution of the African slave trade to assess the long term effects of the slave trade on African economic development.

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