

SUMMARY

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THE GEOGRAPHY OF GENIUS

BY ERIC WEINER



Summary of The Geography of Genius by Eric Weiner

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Are some places simply “smarter” than others?

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Introduction

There's no doubt about it: our society places a high value on intellectual prowess. And we are especially invested in those whose achievements outshine that of the average person. These are the people we consider to be geniuses: the game-changers, the revolutionaries, the whiz kids who make us see the world in a new light. Indeed, without many of the world's legendary geniuses such as Mozart, Einstein, and Shakespeare, our world would be devoid of many life-changing contributions to science, technology, and the arts. But as much as we value intelligence, we struggle to quantify it. Because there are so many different types of intelligence, it's difficult to identify a singular component that generates it. But is it possible that genius can come from a place? Are people really smarter if they're born in a certain place? When you consider places like ancient Athens and the Silicon Valley-- both notorious hubs of intellect-- it's easy to assume that that might be the case! But the author affirms that the answer is actually a little more complicated than you might think. And over the course of this summary, we'll explore that answer.



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Culture Can Breed Intellect

In an opinion piece for *The Atlantic*, the author summarized this book by providing a short sample of his research on the city of Athens. He observed that “the tiny, dirty Greek city-state produced more brilliant minds—from Socrates to Aristotle—than any other place the world before or since. But why?” Many historians and scholars have tried to answer this question before him. The historian Peter Watson surmised that “Athenian genius simply the convergence of ‘a happy set of circumstances.’” Likewise, classicist Humphrey Kito remarked that “the Athenians were not very numerous, not very powerful, not very organized, but they nevertheless had a totally new conception of what human life was for, and showed for the first time what the human mind was for.” However, the author’s research has indicated that this overflow of intellect did not arise from a place of opulence and luxury--although we often assume that is the case.

In fact, the author’s research provides substantial evidence to the contrary. He wrote in *The Atlantic* that “ancient Athens was a place of public opulence and private squalor. The streets were noisy, narrow, and dirty. The houses of the wealthy were indistinguishable from those of the poor, and both were equally shoddy—constructed of wood and sun-dried clay, and so flimsy that robbers gained entry by simply digging.” So, from these examples, we can see that growing up in Athens did not automatically provide one with a smarter or more advantageous experience. So, what made the difference? The author affirms that civic pride actually made all the difference in the world. This might be an interesting concept to consider because many of us don’t think about civic pride at all. To contextualize this on a personal level, you might ask yourself: how invested am I in improving the place where I live? Do you care a great deal about local elections? Are you a member of the city council? Are you actively involved in initiatives to improve the town? For many people, the answer is no.

But as the author remarks, apathy was not to be found in Athens! In his opinion piece, he explains this cultural phenomenon by writing: “the ancient

Athenians enjoyed a deeply intimate relationship with their city. Civic life was not optional, and the Athenians had a word for those who refused to participate in public affairs: *idiotes*. There was no such thing as an aloof, apathetic Athenian. “The man who took no interest in the affairs of state was not a man who minded his own business,” wrote the ancient historian Thucydides, “but a man who had no business being in Athens at all.” When it came to public projects, the Athenians spent lavishly. (And, if they could help it, with other people’s money—they paid for the construction of the Parthenon, among other things, with funds from the Delian League, an alliance of several Greek city-states formed to fend off the Persians!)”

So, because the Athenians cherished a strong culture of civic pride, every citizen was deeply invested in doing his best for Athens. This therefore created a culture of competition that motivated every citizen to excel, to surpass his own personal best (along with the accomplishments of those around him!) In short, this means that Athens was successful not because it was a place of opulence and not because its geography literally made people more intelligent. Instead, Athens became a world leader in intellect because the Athenians were able to cut through the apathy that dominates so many people’s lives. The author observes that, actually, many people are capable of accomplishing great things. But because it requires so much effort to push ourselves and reach our full potential, most of us don’t put in the work. But if you are driven by a strong sense of cultural pride that ties your identity to your civic accomplishments, you have an automatic cheat code to hack that common apathy. As a result, the Athenians produced many of the world’s brilliant minds because of their cultural values.

So, is it possible for people to be smarter just because they were born in a specific place? Not at all. The author’s research disproves this and offers a much more reasonable explanation. It also builds on earlier studies which have debunked the “geography = genius” theory as pseudoscience. But if this theory has been debunked, how did we ever get the idea that geography generates genius? Well, like many problematic things, this theory originated in the nineteenth century. It was the brainchild of Victorian sociologist Francis Galton and it was closely tied to the study of phrenology. (And, like

phrenology, Galton's theory was racist, ableist, and entirely nonsensical!) But in order to give you a little bit of context, you first need to know what these widely accepted pseudosciences involved.

Phrenology, for example, was a form of scientific racism which used the shape of a person's head to ascertain their moral character and intelligence. Although this might sound completely bizarre and illogical, this was a genuine field of scientific study during the nineteenth century! Historian James Poskett unpacks the concept in his own critical analysis by explaining that, "Phrenology was pioneered by physicians such as Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828), who believed that the brain is made up numerous organs, each linked to a faculty such as benevolence and destructiveness. As such, a protruding forehead – where the 'perceptive' organs resided – could indicate an impressive intellect, whereas a bump on the crown was the sign of a strong sense of morality. These ideas certainly struck a chord. Phrenological societies sprang up from New York to Calcutta, and audiences were soon flocking to lectures on the science of the skull. These people genuinely believed that phrenology could make the world a better place."

Galton also believed the same thing about his own theory of genius. If one could simply pin down the geography of genius, Victorian sociologists posited that you could create a super race of highly intelligent people who would unlock the ultimate human experience. Fortunately, however, modern science has completely debunked phrenology and Galton's theory! And today we know that the Athenians were not a secret society of super intellectuals, nor were they the wealthiest and most successful of all Greek city-states. Instead, they simply created a culture that inspired their citizens to succeed.



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Why Silicon Valley is the Modern Birthplace of Genius

The same is true of Silicon Valley, which has come to be known as the modern Athens. That's because, just like Athens, Silicon Valley has produced many of the world's most brilliant minds. Home to such titans of technology as Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Peter Thiel, and Steve Wozniak, Silicon Valley also has us asking: is there something in the water? Fortunately, however, this culture also debunks Galton's theory because many of the geniuses who call Silicon Valley home are not originally from the town at all! In fact, Silicon Valley's most notable are transplants who moved there to pursue a job!

But Silicon Valley also differs from Athens in one other respect: where Athens lacked opulence, Silicon Valley has become a hub of cutting edge tech and unlimited resources. As a result, this environment has a unique edge that enables it to achieve and maintain intense levels of success: the unique combination of superior resources and superior intellect converging in one location. So, even though it differs from Athens in a couple of key ways, one principle remains the same: this hotbed of genius once again proves that it is culture, not climate, which cultivates genius. So, what cultural values have made Silicon Valley so successful? Well, the author's research confirms that failure is actually one of the primary ingredients for their success.

At first, this might sound like an oxymoron, but it's true! That's because embracing failure is a revolutionary mentality that invites us to think outside the box. And that's exactly why Silicon Valley founder Fred Terman deliberately encouraged his proteges to fail. For starters, he understood that giving yourself the freedom to fail means allowing yourself to look silly, try new things, and embrace new experiences. He also understood that human beings are very reluctant to give themselves these gifts. That's why he advocates "failing the smart way": try new things and use your mistakes to show you what does and doesn't work. Take the gift of these lessons and let them teach you how to improve!

This revolutionary mindset plays a major role in the success of Silicon Valley. Because if you take a host of extremely smart people and show them how to unlock their potential, you can create a community of confident geniuses before you know it! And being well-connected doesn't hurt either! In fact, their ability to skilfully utilize connections is another reason that Silicon Valley is so successful. That's because smart people tend to gravitate towards other smart people, even if their types of intelligence are very different. For example, it's totally possible that a shy but brilliant computer nerd might be friends with a charismatic writer. If they joined forces on a project, they could balance out each other's strengths and weaknesses and become an unstoppable force! And because every genius who's killing it in Silicon Valley likely has a few talented buddies who could also bring something to the table, it pays to reach out to those connections.

The overall culture of Silicon Valley pays off as well. If you're constantly bringing in new talent with different skills and encouraging people to speak up, think outside the box, and embrace failure, it means you're guaranteed to create a revolving door of fresh new ideas that will improve your company! This social awareness and respect for others' gifts has contributed a great deal to Silicon Valley's success. By utilizing these connections and encouraging collaboration, Silicon Valley corporations have created a unique and dynamic network of intelligent people! So, in this example, just as in the case of Athens, we can see that climates don't create genius. Culture does.



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Final Summary

What do Silicon Valley and ancient Athens have in common? Both are famous for producing some of the world's most brilliant minds! Although they are thousands of miles and years apart, this uncanny commonality has prompted scholars to ask if there is a possible correlation between geography and genius. However, the author's research plainly demonstrates that nothing could be further from the truth. To debunk the common colloquial expression, there is nothing in the water. Instead, both Athens and Silicon Valley have cultivated unique cultures that motivate people to do their best. Because people internalize and act on these cultural values, their feats of superior intellect have generated the perception that Silicon Valley and Athens are magical spots for nurturing geniuses. But in reality, geography has nothing to do with the genius that populates these areas.



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