

Relative returns; Jared Diamond's view of traditional societies can be infectious and winning, but do his ideas about the past reproduce Victorian misconceptions? ANTHROPOLOGY

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Jared Diamond

THE WORLD UNTIL YESTERDAY

What can we learn from traditional societies? 497pp. Allen Lane. £25.

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The World Until Yesterday is the latest example of Jared Diamond's knack for framing big questions in a way that generates public discussion. His most famous work, the bestselling *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), asked what enabled European and Asian societies to dominate so many others. This was followed in 2005 by *Collapse*, an allegorical exploration of how past societies allowed themselves to be destroyed by environmental catastrophes they themselves brought on. In both books, Diamond unfurls a vast canvas spanning the length and breadth of human history, on which he sets out an array of far-flung cases that he explores in detail. The formula is to present world history as a source of "natural experiments" answering Diamond's big questions. In *The World Until Yesterday*, the question is, "What can we learn from traditional societies?".

As Diamond points out, much current thinking about human nature and society is based on what he calls "WEIRD" - Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic - populations. But what of the rest of humankind that doesn't shop in a supermarket, but gets food by foraging, herding, fishing or farming on a small household scale? What of the experience of people who lived during the previous 200 millennia since *Homo sapiens* originated? When viewed on this scale, it's but the blink of an eye since the first metal tools were forged (about 7,000 years ago) and the first state societies arose (1,500 years later). Yet psychologists, economists and others commonly draw conclusions about all of humanity from experience in modern state societies. Ethnocentrism and historical myopia like this cry out for redress.

So in *The World Until Yesterday*, Diamond constructs a sample of thirty-nine indigenous - or, in his words, "traditional" - peoples. There are Inuit and Northwest Coast Indians, Aborigines, Andaman Islanders, Ainu, Turkanans, Nuer, Machiguenga and Piraha. Diamond himself has extensive experience of research on ornithology in different parts of New Guinea, and in the book he uses stories from his time there to enliven material he has culled from the anthropological literature.

Can we find anything in these exotic societies that can be put to use in enriching our own lives? This is

not a line of questioning that is addressed by many professional anthropologists today. Most of us would rather encourage our audiences to get beyond the framework of their own needs by trying to see the world from the perspective of the people being discussed. Yet whenever I teach an introductory Anthropology class at my university, the first thing my students wonder when they read about societies very unlike their own is, what about them is good or even better than our own society, and what about them is worse? Evaluating the other in comparison to oneself is understandable, perhaps even inevitable, and in this book Diamond does it earnestly and at length.

Consider his discussion of warfare. Savagery in warfare is a salient element of the conventional stereotype of "primitive" societies. But modern warfare is often conducted on a mass scale and has a greater potential for devastation. So which is worse? Is it ours, the kind sponsored by nation states and fought by armies equipped with modern weapons like machine guns and tanks, or theirs, the kind fought by bands, clans and tribes armed with spears, knives and guns? To arrive at an answer one needs definitions and criteria - the tedious preliminaries. Then come the awful comparisons. Which has a higher mortality rate for combatants? Which has a greater mortality rate relative to total population? Which has the more damaging psychological impact? Which occurs with greater regularity? And in which case does the mobilization for war and defence more dramatically deform the rest of society? Diamond concludes that in most respects traditional war is worse. This leaving us with no lessons to learn, he backpedals and looks for a different sort of virtue in traditional warfare, something more rarefied.

The virtue that he comes up with is dubious and equivocal, but perhaps the most we can expect given this type of inquiry: traditional wars dramatize and satisfy a purportedly natural "thirst for revenge", which Diamond imagines is felt by aggrieved people everywhere. Those of us living in state societies are called on to suppress this urge to take an eye for an eye; our modern governments oblige us to turn the quest for justice over to our law enforcement authorities. Diamond's conclusion, then, is Solomon-like: ours may be better, but theirs is not without good. Unlike the so-called traditional people, we moderns sacrifice the fulfilment of revenge, but we enjoy the still greater advantage of "living in peace and safety" thanks to our police, courts and prisons.

The book is more convincing where Diamond does not have to fabulate so much to find a storyline he likes. For example, in a chapter on dispute resolution, he explains why Papua New Guineans surprisingly lay aside claims about the rights and wrongs of an affront. Disputing parties pay compensation to one another reciprocally, regardless of who was at fault. Papua New Guineans do this because their overwhelming priority is to heal the breach and re-establish positive relations between the parties directly. When wrongs are righted by courts, this concern is often overlooked. Score one for the traditional people.

In Diamond's chapter on childcare, comparison similarly favours the traditionals. The benefits of on-demand breastfeeding, cosleeping, mixed-age playgroups, and raising children in large extended families ("it takes a village"), will not be news to most readers. Even so, Diamond's enthusiasm and clarity about the topic are infectious and winning.

Some of this recalls the arguments made popular in the twentieth century by the American anthropologist Margaret Mead. In books, magazine articles and television talk show interviews, Mead presented Pacific cultures to popular audiences as a source of lessons to help inform their own lives, and as a provocation to seeing the arbitrariness and imperfection of American social conventions on childrearing, character formation, sex roles, and so on that her audiences had been raised to think of as necessary and natural.

While Mead's goals were admirable, her approach wasn't perfect. Individuals in far-off societies were portrayed as governed by their cultures, while Westerners' ability to change their culture in desired ways was overestimated, disregarding the power of entrenched institutions to maintain the status quo.

Diamond's book replicates and even exaggerates these shortcomings. In his work, cultures appear as "lifestyles" formed by social and individual "choices" and adaptively motivated "rules", and he overstates his readers' capacities to change their own societies. This is partly a literary device to convince us that the lessons he writes about are not just academic, but practical and implementable. But even allowing for this, Diamond's idea of social process is suffused by a curious naivety. This is nowhere more striking than in the book's celebration of the nation state, for Diamond the defining feature of modern society, which he presents as the steadfast guardian of social order, safety and health. He seems to forget that states can also wreak havoc through war, oppression, dispossession, concentration camps, detentions and other atrocities. Or that they can be good to some people while harming others at the same time.

If this were the whole of the book's approach, I might still applaud. Today's professional anthropologists have largely stepped back from publicly championing the value of cultural diversity, perhaps to a fault: the field's traditional subject matter and theories hold great appeal. By entering the intellectual vacuum that has been left by present-day anthropologists, Diamond articulates a clear reason for readers to learn about cultures different from their own. The reason is not that cultural knowledge can help us deal effectively with those from different cultural backgrounds (for example, helping Westerners do more effective business with Chinese firms), but that the study of any culture might reveal superior possibilities for humanity, for the future. This message reasserts the powerful (if imperfect) relativist anthropology of Mead and her contemporaries. As Diamond writes,

Societies from [our narrow slice of humanity] achieved world dominance not because of a general superiority but for specific reasons:.. . technological, political, and military. . . . Despite those particular advantages, modern industrial societies didn't develop superior approaches to raising children, treating the elderly, settling disputes, avoiding non-communicable diseases, and other societal problems. Thousands of traditional societies developed a wide array of different approaches to those problems.

So it is Diamond's hope that we may all find new cultural practices to "adopt from the huge range of traditional human experience", unexpected points on which the cultures of marginal people are better than those of the mainstream.

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But there is another, even older idea that frames Diamond's inquiry in *The World Until Yesterday*, and that is that traditional societies resemble "how all of our ancestors lived for tens of thousands of years, until virtually yesterday". This anthropological idea - proclaimed in the title of the book - comes not from cultural relativists like Mead in the twentieth century, but straight out of Victorian times.

It was a basic premise of nineteenth-century anthropology that the world's tribes and nations were related through a ladder of progress. The primitives, the savages and the barbarians of every continent were thought to be ascending the ladder through the same series of evolutionary stages behind the educated elite of Europe and North America, resting even now on rungs on which the civilized had trodden long

before. For civilized audiences, the idea that people in different places passed through similar stages lent a special interest and value to those at the lower end of the scale, who could thus be seen as representing their own very deep past. They were a kind of living museum exhibit, revealing, as the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan put it in 1877, "the history and experience of our own remote ancestors when in corresponding conditions" of progress.

Diamond's book could well have done without this idea. Learning from other cultures does not require us to think of them as deriving from our own past. And even if someone was actually my own ancestor, it doesn't mean that what worked for them will work for me. Apparently recognizing this, Diamond offers contemporary justifications for the cultural lessons he draws from traditional lifestyles, making a case for each in terms of its functional utility in the modern world. Even though it is not logically necessary to Diamond's main argument that features of traditional societies are useful and good, the identification of contemporary indigenous people with "our own remote ancestors" is prominent in the book rhetorically. And in one anomalous chapter, the chapter on religion, it is basically all Diamond has to offer.

Here Diamond seems to forget his stated purpose of distilling practical lessons from traditional lifestyles. Switching to a more academic mode, he propounds a speculative theory about the history of religion as proceeding through a sequence of evolutionary stages. He reinvents a hypothesis about cultural evolution that was made prominent by E. B. Tylor in nineteenth-century England: that modern religious beliefs, widely taken to be revealed truths, actually evolved by stages out of the animism that one could observe among peasants and primitives. Except for an amusing analogy to the evolution of eels, this chapter re-creates the pseudo-scientific, conjectural history of Victorian times.

Renewing the mid-twentieth-century relativism of scholars such as Mead is a reasonable, constructive move. But cultural evolutionism of the sort Diamond offers simply cannot be countenanced today. Yes, societies in the deep past were stateless, relatively small and non-industrialized. But do they therefore form a category with contemporary societies that manifest some of these same features? The contrast with our own society makes it easy and seductive to lump them together into a single composite image of primitive - I mean, "traditional" - humankind.

But this is like categorizing tigers with toads because in having four legs, both make common difference from us who have two. If Western societies really do represent an extreme edge of the spectrum of human diversity, then categorizing other peoples as like one another because they are all different from us becomes increasingly meaningless. It obscures from view the many dimensions of variation that distinguish them from one another. Neither my Semitic ancestors nor Montezuma had iPads, but how alike does this make them? It is a fallacy to treat them as similar because both share features which we do not.

Diamond also evokes the common misconception that humankind evolved to be adaptive in certain conditions, and that these resemble the conditions in which some people now live. This staple of newspaper science implies that indigenous cultures should have a great deal in common, since they must be adapted to meeting similar challenges of providing basic subsistence, shelter, safety and so on. But that presumption is belied by the ethnographic evidence: the environmental challenges people face in different parts of the world are diverse almost beyond imagining, as are the solutions by which they surmount them.

The analogies Diamond draws between human and animal evolution do not stand up to current understanding, either. We now know that human evolution differs from that of animal species because of *Homo sapiens's* exceptional neural plasticity, which, together with a uniquely long maturational period, dramatically increases human adaptability. Neural plasticity is the foundation for high-order skills such as shared attention, language, complex emotion, self-awareness and self-control, anticipating the future, strategic thinking and creativity. It allows humans to learn complicated new motor skills like typing, weaving and skiing even though these were not in our first forebears' repertoire, and it lets individuals keep on learning these new skills until late in life, unlike other species in which the ability to learn attenuates sharply at maturation.

Unlike other animals, in which individuals mostly keep to themselves what they learn about their environs in the course of their lives (like where to look for good food), human beings share knowledge. The facility with which humans communicate with one another is an evolutionary game-changer. Evolution 1.0, if you will, embracing all living things, moves irregularly along genetic channels and affects what can be coded in proteins. But Evolution 2.0, which is specific to humans, overflows these genetic channels in a flood of change created by everything humans pass on to one another by social means like talking, imitating, collaborating and creating tools, homes and newspapers. The term for all this non-genetically transmitted stuff is culture. The advent of culture kicked human change up a notch.

There is strong evidence that modern humans originated in a highly unstable environment back in East Africa, in which success depended on innovation and behavioural versatility. Climatic swings were producing repeated, large-scale changes in the kinds of plants and animals that were available to eat, making survival dependent on the ability continually to adjust to new challenges and develop new skills and strategies in order to exploit multiple plant foods and animal prey, each with their seasonal cycles.

Add to this the fact that human adaptability only begins with the body and you have a new level of versatility. In the familiar, neo-Darwinian Evolution 1.0 conception that Diamond relies on, the environment is an externally given factor, an independently varying source of selection pressure to which individuals must adapt. But human individuals adapt the environment, moulding it to fit their own needs. Of course, other animals, too, alter their environments - to some extent all do. But no other species has such a wide repertoire of environment-changing abilities. Termites make mounds and beavers dam ponds, but humans build longhouses, treehouses, houseboats, yurts, pueblos and condos. When facing an inhospitable environment, we don't have to adapt to it, we can work to change it. The environment to which human individuals adapt is in large part an environment that they and their forebears have themselves created.

What all of this means is that, as far back into "yesterday" as humanity goes, the environment was dynamic and varied. To his credit, Diamond tries to reflect diversity by drawing in examples of societies from a wide range of places. But nowhere in the book are these societies described in their own terms; they are just points on a map and sources for interspersed details and snatches. In a single paragraph, we read about New Guinea Highlanders, the Nuer of the Sudan, Mailu islanders from New Guinea's south coast, and Yanomami Indians of Brazil and Venezuela; and the paragraph after it begins "Among the Siriono Indians of Bolivia. . . ". This, too, recalls the anthropology of more than a century ago, when armchair scholars culled ethnographic details about the world's peoples from library volumes and travellers' letters, and catalogued them under general headings such as "war and weaponry", "supernatural beliefs", "types of family structure" and "institutions of government". The method produced

tomes that were organized, like *The World Until Yesterday*, around features or traits found in many societies, with each trait (such as belief in visions) exemplified by a cascade of instances from different parts of the world. It is often joked that the subject of such anthropology is actually a composite tribe called the "Amongstas" (as in "Among the Malays. . . etc"). In comprehending everywhere, it becomes about nowhere. Readers were offered a single composite image of "yesterday's man".

At various points, *The World Until Yesterday* calls to mind an old comedy skit in which Mel Brooks plays a man from prehistory being interviewed on TV. Responding to deadpan questions from Carl Reiner about the origins of religion, language and so on, Brooks offers outlandish, Yiddish-accented, firsthand tales of what happened thousands of years ago. (The invention of fire? "And came a big bolt of lightning and set the tree on fire and set Murray's beard and his clothes and his hair all on fire.") Like Brooks, Diamond tells us of an ancient world of which he has first-hand experience, juxtaposing vivid stories about his research in Papua New Guinea with discussion of the world before modernity. But whereas Brooks is funny because he is projecting his preconceptions on to the past so obviously, Diamond sanctimoniously presents his as scientific findings.

Indeed, in several chapters it is hard to escape the impression that what we are encountering are not so much great discoveries from unfamiliar cultural worlds, but Diamond's own pet peeves. We are told that modern Americans systematically overestimate the risks of terrorist bombings, nuclear accidents and genetically modified foods, when they should really be worried about mundane activities that appear to be within their own control, like driving in a car, standing up in the shower or climbing up on a stepladder. When Diamond confesses that he himself is unusually cautious in such matters, we realize that this is one of his personal preoccupations, something that in other contexts forms part of his personality rather than his work.

This doesn't necessarily lessen his persuasiveness. In fact, the chapters in which he has a personal investment are probably the most memorable, such as that in which the septuagenarian Diamond writes about the marginalization of old people in the US. In the chapter on the grave medical consequences of sedentary lifestyles and the high consumption of salt and sugar, his writing is forceful, because he approaches these topics from the personal vantage of an ex-physiologist. If he were a woman fifty years younger, he might be writing about different things, like love affairs out of wedlock or the artificiality of gender roles, as Mead did in her work on Samoa and New Guinea. Diamond's arguments aren't weakened simply because they have personal resonance. But they in no way require that indigenous populations of today be cast as people of "yesterday".

In 1935, Mead could write whatever she pleased about the lives of New Guinea villagers, with little expectation that any of them would read her writings, little care as to how they would react to them, and little compunction about her ties to New Guinea's colonial administration. But since the 1960s, with decolonization, anthropologists have been coming to terms with the political aspirations of the people they study, and their heightened awareness that others are writing about them in the name of science. For many anthropologists, it is no longer convincing to defend the viability of non-mainstream lifeways in the abstract, without pitching in to defend those lifeways against the forces that threaten them. It is no longer ethical to do ethnographic research without the informed consent of the people studied, without considering how the research will affect them, or without reciprocating their hosts' hospitality and help in culturally appropriate ways. It is now widely recognized that anthropology, like all field science, takes place within larger orders of inequality in power, privilege and wealth. This does not make the research

untenable, but it does call for a certain sensitivity.

One might reply that all this is politics and not the business of science. But what's so scientific about asking whether warfare is worse in traditional or modern societies, given how much depends on the way these categories are set up and interpreted? What's so scientific about writing conjectural Just So-style stories to account for the prevalence of belief in supernatural agents? Diamond might wish to present himself as the voice of disinterested truth, but this stance is not convincing.

In 2008, Diamond previewed a theme of this book in a *New Yorker* article entitled "Vengeance is Ours", which told the chilling story of a convulsive tribal war in the New Guinea Highlands. Several months later, the two men he had depicted as the war's chief architect and primary victim joined together to file a \$10 million lawsuit against Diamond in New York, alleging defamation. (Because of the unexpected death of the American lawyer for the Papua New Guineans, an agreement was later reached for their lawsuit against Diamond in New York to be "withdrawn without prejudice".)

An investigation by a media ethics news site (imediaethics.org) led by Rhonda Roland Shearer found that Diamond's article had been riddled with inaccuracies. The eloquent quotations attributed to the purported architect of the fighting had been reconstructed by Diamond, apparently for the most part from memory, some years after the man had worked as his driver during an environmental study Diamond did in a region of oil fields managed by ChevronTexaco.

Others have speculated that the driver told Diamond a boastful story to pass the time in the car. Research by Paul Sillitoe and Mako John Kuwimb suggests that the war Diamond described as having lasted three years, killing "about thirty people", may have referred to a smaller area conflict that lasted about six months and had a death toll of four. In Diamond's article, his driver-warrior's chosen target of vengeance, Henep Isum Mandingo, was maimed during the climactic battle when a bamboo arrow cut his spinal cord - "That's even better than killing him, because he's now still alive today, eleven years later, paralyzed in a wheelchair.... People will see his constant suffering". But what one can see, in recent photographs on the internet, is Mr Mandingo standing tall and looking perfectly fit.

In the book, Jared Diamond ventures to discuss a different story of war in New Guinea, one drawn from the ethnographic literature on the Dani people, who live in the western part of the New Guinea island, which is governed by Indonesia. (It is the eastern part that forms the independent country of Papua New Guinea.) Now Dani people, too, are speaking out, objecting to the book's portrayal of them as living remnants of the "stone age", and contributing to their oppression. As the Dani leader Barry Wenda recently told *Survival International*,

The Indonesian government did not rescue us from a cycle of [tribal] violence like Jared Diamond says. [Instead] they brought violence to us like we had never known before. They have murdered, raped, and imprisoned my people, and they have stolen our land to make themselves rich.... Indonesia told the world that... it was us that was violent and not them. This book is doing the same.

Clearly these Dani people, like the others who fill *The World Until Yesterday*, contend with contemporary challenges and problems, and one of these is in fact the notion that they belong to the past and so can be pushed aside, even dispossessed, in order to make way for progress. The truth is that they, like all of us,

live in the present. To persist in portraying them as the living relics of our ancestors' time is to return to an arrogant anthropology of yesterday that is empirically unjustified, morally untenable, and for most anthropologists, thankfully, left behind.

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