

Why Jared Diamond is Wrong

Jared Diamond, in his new book 'The world until yesterday', makes two erroneous assertions which, if they go unchallenged, will set back by several decades the movement to secure for the world's 150 million tribal people the right to exist, and be themselves, in the 21st Century.

The first, no less wrong for being a common prejudice, is that today's tribal people are in effect living fossils, the last vestiges of human society as it once was. The obvious endpoint to this argument is that today's tribes will in the end 'evolve', and 'progress', in the way everyone else has. This tired notion has been debunked by experts for years.

The second, and this one's received remarkably little publicity, is that tribal people engage in constant warfare, and need the benevolent hand of the state to stop them killing each other. This will raise a hollow laugh in West Papua, an area Mr Diamond knows well, where 100,000 Papuans have been killed by the Indonesian authorities since 1963.

If you think all this sounds a bit like the arguments put forward by missionaries, explorers and colonial governments from the 16th Century onwards, to justify the 'pacification' and conquest of 'savages' in far-off lands, you're right. And it's just as harmful now as it was then.