

A Book Review of Jared Diamond's 'The World Until Yesterday'

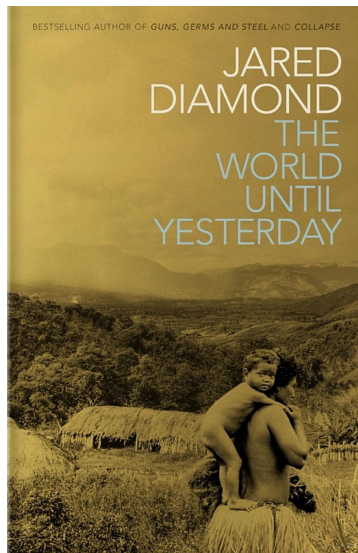
The 'most authoritative polymath of our age' offers a reverse
recipe very much to Chris Knight's taste

Chris Knight & Karen Shook

January 3, 2013

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The world has been waiting for this book. Others have attempted to persuade us that tribal people can teach us how to live. Most, however, have failed to convince, presenting us with yet another version of the Noble Savage myth. Jared Diamond is no romantic. He writes with conviction and erudition. It is probably no exaggeration to describe him as the most authoritative polymath of our age — the man who, in his 1997 book *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, explained the true reasons for the West's ultimate dominance over the globe and in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005), warned that this same civilisation may now be digging its own grave. In *The World Until Yesterday*, Diamond turns his massive erudition to an equally necessary project. The fact that Western civilisation conquered all does not necessarily make it sustainable or prove that we have superior ideas about bringing up children, keeping healthy or living well.

Long before psychologists advised us to breastfeed and maintain close physical contact with our children, our hunter-gatherer ancestors were doing it. Diamond reminds us that extant hunter-gatherers everywhere express horror at the idea of corporal punishment of children. Young people are not the private property of their parents: rather, they are free to move from dwelling to dwelling, finding love as they choose from a wide range of potential carers of different ages. Diamond is wholly convincing when he celebrates the emotionally secure, self-reliant, good-humoured and creative human beings produced by such collectivist methods of childcare. Why, he asks, don't we in the West straightforwardly embrace these tried-and-tested methods of preserving the mental health of future generations?

As Diamond is well aware, life in a city sets limits on collective parenting: the freedoms enjoyed by forest-dwellers are simply not open to us. Nevertheless, solid scientific evidence of the value of grandparents and extended families cannot do any harm. And he never skates over the difficult issues. In harsh environments where mobility is a matter of life and death, it is understandable why old people who are unable to keep up may be encouraged to let nature take its course.

Another issue concerns law and order. Compared with Western industrialised societies, the per capita death rate from violence in stateless societies does tend to be high. In New Guinea, for example, a prime reason for the rapid acceptance of colonial rule was relief on the part of everyone who could henceforth sleep soundly at night, free from the fear of nocturnal raids arising from a seemingly never-ending cycle of blood vengeance.

At his most passionate when lamenting the current collapse of linguistic diversity, Diamond details the disappearance of minority languages at the rate of one every nine days. We hear much anguished discussion about the accelerating disappearance of birds and frogs as our Coca-Cola civilisation spreads over the world, but much less attention has been paid to the disappearance of our languages. Looming over us today is the tragedy of the impending loss of most of our cultural heritage. Diamond is scathing in his criticism of those opinionated progressives — particularly English speakers — who see no reason why their own language should not be the only one left.

He invites us to reverse roles here. While Shakespeare *can* be translated into Mandarin, we English speakers would regard it as a loss to humanity if Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy were available only in Mandarin translation. In his usual authoritative way, Diamond concludes his discussion of language loss by surveying the many proven cognitive benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, reminding us that for a whole community to be monolingual is in evolutionary terms unusual — a historically recent aberration.

As an anthropologist, my main criticism of Diamond's book is the way it conflates Neolithic with pre-Neolithic cultural models. Understandably, his thinking is shaped overwhelmingly by his long-term fieldwork in New Guinea. The societies he is familiar with traditionally engaged in gardening and farming, with all the territorialism, male dominance and warfare that that mode of life typically implies. No book can cover everything, and Diamond apologises for leaving gender relations and sexual inequalities unexplored. Unfortunately, this leaves the reader to infer that territorialism, warfare and male dominance are inevitable features of the human condition. To be fair, Diamond is familiar with the literature on hunter-gatherer egalitarianism and makes an effort to incorporate this evidence. But to discuss hunter-gatherers while ignoring gender is to leave out the central organising principle of their lives — the one that makes everything else work. If it is true that we lived by hunting and gathering for at least 90 per cent of our evolutionary history, this really is of central importance. If all humans have an evolved psychological nature — and Diamond insists that we do — then it was shaped during tens of millennia as social and sexual egalitarians, not hierarchically organised defenders of land, women and property.

Excellent when he sticks to science, Diamond is less convincing when he turns to politics. Here is an example: "Large populations can't function without leaders who make the decisions, executives who carry out the decisions, and bureaucrats who administer the decisions and laws. Alas for all of you readers who are anarchists and dream of living without any state government, those are the reasons why your dream is unrealistic..." As I read these lines, I had the funny feeling they were directly aimed at me! It would be interesting to research the extent to which anthropologists' political beliefs correlate with those of the people they study. My closest professional colleagues study African hunter-gatherers; all of us have witnessed and participated in emphatically egalitarian social, economic and gender relationships. As a result, we have all become "anarchist" in the sense Diamond intends. We have had an excellent education — by people who make anarchy work. I should add that anyone familiar with hunter-gatherer systems of extended kinship would be surprised at Diamond's description of them as "small-scale": unlike truncated Western notions of kinship and family life, these extraordinary systems have the power to embrace and integrate entire continents.

We live today in an age of mobile phones and the internet — peaceful forms of technology to which hunter-gatherers instantly relate. I fail to see why territories, borders, armies and bureaucrats — the political legacy of the Neolithic — should

be needed any longer. Earth has been carved up between competing, violent states for 5,000 years, bringing us — as Diamond warned in *Collapse* — to the brink of environmental catastrophe and the greatest collapse in all history. Time, surely, to go beyond piecemeal improvements and instead radically rethink *all* aspects of what we like to call “civilisation”.

Political differences aside, this is a book to be celebrated. Diamond has opened the door to “reverse anthropology” — the kind that learns from the people it studies and applies those lessons to itself. “Development” is a good thing but it works both ways. In countless respects, we in the West are in dire need of development. We’ve a long way to go, but this book is a great start.

The Author

A 1998 honour remains the award of which Jared Diamond, professor of geography at the University of California, Los Angeles, and keen bird-watcher, is proudest. “It came when my parents were in their last year of life, in their nineties, and they knew what a Pulitzer prize meant. I am glad they lived to see their son receiving it.”

He was taught to read, aged 3, by his mother, a linguist and former teacher. “At 5, I became fascinated with H.E. Marshall’s *Kings and Things: First Stories from English History*. My mother later told my sister that seeing me taking notes on the book cemented her opinion that I showed promise.” He recalls, with gratitude, “parents who encouraged my interests, a wonderful high school that offered great courses in Greek and in history while preparing me for a career in science, university experiences (as a student at Harvard University and the University of Cambridge) that left me freedom, and employers — Harvard and UCLA — that didn’t constrain me.”

Of the scholarly tribes he has observed first-hand, Diamond says: “in physiology, the scientific disputes in which I was involved were usually polite, because we all knew that the dispute might be settled by a decisive experiment within a year, so it wasn’t prudent to insist too strongly on an unproven view. In ecology it is much more difficult to do decisive experiments, so disputes are prone to fester and to be nastier. Nastiest of all are disputes among anthropologists because not only are they difficult to resolve but they are also considered to have political overtones.”

His classical piano-playing not only allows him to accompany instrumentalists in chamber music and singers in German lieder but has also brought “auxiliary benefits”. “Just before proposing to my hoped-for wife, I played for her her favourite piece by Brahms, which I had spent all day practising. She accepted me.”

- Karen Shook

The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?

By Jared Diamond Allen Lane, 512pp, £20.00
ISBN 9780713998986
Published 31 December 2012

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The first part, the book review is written by Chris Knight & the latter part, the author description, is written by Karen Shook.

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