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Jared Diamond: The world until yesterday: what can we learn from traditional societies?

Penguin Books, New York, 2012, 499 pp, ISBN 978-0-14-312440-5 (pbk.)

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The World Until Yesterday is the third in a series of best-selling and prize-winning volumes by Jared Diamond addressing the large issues of our current condition and possible futures. In *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) Diamond offers an account of how we have come to the present global situation of wide disparities in socio-economic development and wealth. In *Collapse* (2005) he recounts the fates of prehistoric societies ranging from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the Classic Maya, with an emphasis on humanity's vulnerability to spectacular, usually environmental, failure. In this most recent volume (2012), the focus is on features of small-scale, pre-modern societies that might usefully inform thinking about our present modernity. In each of these books Diamond draws principally on scholarship in anthropology and geography, mixing personal anecdotes from his field experiences in New Guinea with wide-ranging and engaging summaries of published studies.

Each of Diamond's three books has a mission: geography and accidents of history, not any kind of inherent superiority, have given some northern hemisphere societies the developmental edge at this particular point in time; there are no natural or cultural guarantees favoring the long-term persistence of particular societies, but rather, enduring cause for concern that they, and we, are ephemeral; and, we have much to learn from a broad and tolerant knowledge of the human condition which can be gained by familiarity with the lifeways of traditional peoples. Diamond's subtitles – in chronological order, *The Fates of Human Societies*, *How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, and most recently, *What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* – convey the message: success is contingent; humility is warranted; our responsibility going forward is inescapable; we do have the knowledge required to lessen the odds of failure, if we just pay attention. The tone is urgent but Diamond generally is pragmatic, thoughtful,

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and cautious, making the case in the manner of someone with personal experience outside of his own culture and a wide-ranging and comparative view of human possibilities.

The World Until Yesterday (hereafter *TWUY*) begins with an airport check-in scene in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, a setting that anchors the personal elements of the volume and allows Diamond to set the contrast between a traditional society perched on the edge of modernity and his own world—one probably more familiar to readers of this journal—as a resident of Los Angeles and Professor at UCLA. The core of the book constitutes five sections, each with one or more chapters featuring comparative materials drawn from archaeology, ethnohistory and ethnography: part (1) a chapter on social relationships and boundaries among friends, enemies, persons known and unknown in traditional, small-scale, pre-state societies; part (2) three chapters on dispute resolution, from social adjudication of wrongs occurring among individuals to features of pre-modern warfare, socially sanctioned and organized violence amongst groups; part (3) two chapters on the early and late portions of the life cycle, child-rearing and treatment of the elderly; part (4) two chapters on a concept Diamond calls “constructive paranoia” in response to common hazards of life; and, finally, part (5) three chapters describing the evolution of religion, loss of linguistic diversity, and dangers of our contemporary diet heavy on fats, salts and sugars.

If this chapter-by-chapter list of topics seems eclectic, it is. Nine fields of discussion take up 11 chapters and 466 pages of text, without citations or footnotes. The writing is lucid, entertaining examples abound, and the didactic elements of the text are unwavering but not obtrusive. Diamond rarely goes far wrong in the details that would offend an expert in the multiple fields—anthropology in my case—from which he draws. Still, the whole feels a little uneven and sprawling, undisciplined, the composition too dependent on what could be characterized as a random selection of entertaining and instructive lectures from an introductory anthropology class.

Within its broader framework some parts of the book work better than others. “Compensation for the death of a child” tells the story of tensions between two New Guinea clans following an accident in which a child ran into traffic and was struck by a company truck. Emotions were high; responsibility disputed. Inter-personal violence was possible. Guidance of an older counselor was sought and personal visits and negotiations amongst the parties followed, culminating in a ceremony of compensation and reconciliation. Diamond emphasizes that the aim of all parties as tempers subsided was a peaceful and mutual recognition of grief, leading to restoration of critical social relationships. He contrasts this process with that typically followed by our own, state-authorized legal system, in which institutions remove responsibility for adjudication from the individual parties and focus on deterrence, retribution and rehabilitation. The contrast allows him to argue the advantages of a greater, a New Guinean if you will, emphasis on restorative justice and social healing. Diamond’s account does not overlook defects in the informal New Guinean model—when reconciliation fails there is no authority to forestall vigilante cycles of retribution—nor does he minimize the advantages of our own forms of institutional justice. But he does exemplify a traditional alternative that might lessen the personal and social toll of a modern justice system too focused on legal contests.

Chapters on traditional practices of child rearing and the dangers of modern diet lend themselves to a similar format. Practices associated with pre-modern societies and, by cautious extension, presumably also associated with our evolutionary ancestors, offer insights that might selectively be put to good use in our own lives. Other topics fit the approach less successfully. It may be useful to know that warfare is not an invention of states, but an ancient practice, present among hunter-gatherer as well as early pastoralist and horticultural societies. There are reasons to lament the loss of linguistic diversity among the world's societies, or to be interested in the evolutionary bases of religious practices and a sense of the sacred. But, aside from perhaps subtle additions to tolerance and appreciation for diversity, or personal development, Diamond is less clear about what we should learn from these cases that would elevate in novel ways contemporary human welfare.

Most difficult to fit into the larger practical theme of the book is the chapter on constructive paranoia. Diamond tells three gripping, personal stories of potentially life-threatening situations in which he has found himself while pursuing fieldwork, and he reflects that more constructive paranoia might, in hindsight, have spared him these episodes. The concept thus appears to summarize the unsurprising observation that life can be dangerous, perhaps more so in the seas surrounding and the mountains of Papua New Guinea than the campus of UCLA, and it is wise to be cautious. The chapter on "Lions and other Dangers" describes how traditional societies self-insure against hazards—hunter-gatherers by pooling and sharing game, Andean farmers by scattering fields—long before actuarial statistics and commercial and governmental insurance were invented or available to them. A diversity of risk-reducing means is apparent, but lessons for the present are few.

In an epilogue Diamond disarms an overly sanguine view of the traditional societies he has been describing in adaptive terms: "Traditional life should not be romanticized . . ." (p. 455). There follows a long list of benefits of modern life few would give up and many traditional societies eagerly embrace when they have the opportunity, followed by a summary of amenities of traditional societies we moderns might find sufficiently attractive to adopt, from on-demand nursing of infants to multilingualism and dispute mediation.

Accolades and sales attest that Diamond is enormously successful in synthesizing primary scientific literatures, personal experiences and perspective in a manner that reaches and educates a wide audience; the benefits of this skill for the elevation of public knowledge and debate are enormous. Readers of *Bioeconomics* who approach the book in that light will find it rewarding. However, those looking to Diamond for a professional route into anthropology and geography literatures relevant to their research should be aware of several shortcomings.

The shortcomings arise because scholars in economics and related fields are not Diamond's focal audience. TWUY is without citations, although there is a general "Further Readings" section at the conclusion of the book. A web link (p. 471) to more detailed references is broken, although the materials can be located through a determined search of the publisher's website in a "Readers' Guide" designed for book clubs (<http://www.penguin.com/read/book-clubs/the-world-until-yesterday/9780143124405>). The closest TWUY comes to an over-arching theoretical framework is a loosely applied functionalism couched within Service's 1960s catego-

rization of social evolution into bands, tribes, chiefdoms and states. This does what Diamond needs and keeps theory out of the way of his objectives, but it does not well represent the current state of research in evolutionary anthropology.

For these reasons, bioeconomists looking for complementary scholarship on traditional societies more directly useful to their own research may want to look to recent studies of cultural evolution (Henrich and McElreath 2003; Henrich et al. 2005), research in human behavioral ecology (Winterhalder and Smith 2000; Mace 2014), economically-oriented prehistorians (Earle 2002; Feinman and Garraty 2010) and to individual or collaborative forays into economic history and anthropological and geographical literatures by some of their own, interdisciplinary-minded colleagues (Silver 1995; Ofek 2001; Hejeebu and McCloskey 2004; Seabright 2004; Pryor 2005; Borg-erhoff Mulder et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2010; Bowles 2011; Bowles and Choi 2013; Dow and Reed 2013).

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Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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