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

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Diamond, Jared. *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* New York: Viking, 2012. 512 pages. Hardcover, \$36.00.

Geographer Jared Diamond has done it again. In *The World until Yesterday*, the celebrated author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Collapse* has given us another thought-provoking and fascinating book. As in his previous writing, he brings together multiple disciplines, including anthropology, economics, sociology, political science, and psychology, to draw lessons from a pastiche of human cultures. Diamond's subjects live in traditional societies and in state societies, in bands, clans, tribes, chiefdoms, in WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) societies, and more. They include Aboriginal Australians, Ache Indians, Aka Pygmies, iKung, Inuit, Nuer, and others, particularly New Guineans, whose homeland is Diamond's principle area of expertise. They differ. Some practice idiosyncratic customs, such as widow strangulation or elderly abandonment. Some allow children to play with sharp knives or fire, to wander off for days from home. Taken together, these subjects illuminate mantras of political science and justifications of government. *People live in groups. They never completely agree. Conflicts are bound to arise.*

Diamond shows us that all societies have conflicts, but he argues that state societies are both necessary in a complex, population-dense world and advantageous—shown in words and movements of traditional individuals and peoples. Diamond summarizes: “[A] prime concern of effective state government is to guarantee or at least improve public safety by preventing the state’s citizens from using force against each other” (p. 97). He also illuminates the legitimacy of Criminal Justice and of Peace and Justice Studies among the social sciences—“the overriding goal of state justice is to maintain society’s stability by providing a mandatory alternative to do-it-yourself justice” (p. 99), and “maintenance of peace within a society is one of the most important services that a state can provide” (p. 98). The appreciation of persons for this is reflected in the ease with which they gave up thousands of years of practicing traditional war.

The current of change at present is running from traditional societies to state societies. Hunter-gatherers and small-scale farmers aspire to a Westernized lifestyle and seek to enter the modern world. For his part, Diamond regularly visits Papua New Guinea, but has no intention of moving there. New Guineans themselves know the modern world offers huge advantages: state-imposed peace that they could not achieve for themselves, steel tools, material goods that make life easier, opportunities for formal education and jobs, access to information, access to a broad diversity of people, more rights for women, good health, effective health care, less violence, less danger, and more food security. The comparisons are perceptible to traditional villagers. WEIRD peoples have much longer lives and lower frequency of experiencing the deaths of their children. Nevertheless, traditional children are more self-assured, inventive, and mature, more capable of coping with challenges and dangers while still enjoying their lives more than WEIRD kids. Such considerations prompt the question in the subtitle—*What can we learn from traditional societies?* Also, how can we do it?

To answer this question, Diamond focuses on the practices that suffer from collective behavior and societal action. For example, he discusses the dietary and eating habits that are conducive to noncommunicable diseases such as obesity and diabetes. Here, he argues that individuals and families might learn to take individual action and to help themselves without waiting for others to get wise. Diamond also discusses the advantages of being multilingual and of raising children that way. He claims that the so-called “executive function,” which refers to the ability to adapt to changes in rules and to confusing instructions in real life, is well served by

having learned to accommodate to the arbitrary rules of more than one language.

Another skill set Diamond learned through interaction with friends in traditional New Guinea is what he calls “constructive paranoia.” Because they lack state government and police to protect them, people in traditional societies develop practices to protect themselves from danger, whether from strangers, fickle allies, or environmental risks. We, in our state societies, can individually take charge by assessing dangers in our lifestyles—cars, alcohol, smoking, and home appliances. What would Murphy’s Law and urban raconteurs say about hazards in our everyday lives? Diamond suggests that people in large numbers typically get it out of proportion, fearing genetically modified foods, terrorism, and nuclear disasters when they daily face greater danger from slippery showers and reckless drivers. Diamond turns to agriculture to suggest the forethought and diversification that traditional peoples employ to mitigate risk. He describes how they scatter their gardens to prevent all their crops from being simultaneously devastated by wind-storms, crop disease, or pests, and to obtain a broader spectrum of crops by planting at three different elevations in wider ranging climate zones, making sure that yields never drop below some critical level necessary for their maintenance. Much can be learned from traditional farmers in this regard. Our state societies have already evolved something analogous with their assorted forms of government, diverse politics, different economies, and myriad rules and laws. *People live in groups. They never completely agree. Conflicts are bound to arise.*

This highly informative and very entertaining book is worth serious reading. It is worth assigning and discussing to ensure that we recognize the lessons of traditional peoples who are custodians and guardians of our ecological and cultural diversity. And, as we discover, our own WEIRD societies in all their variety are a phase of human experience, still in transition, and not a capstone. It is only a matter of time before we WEIRDs settle into *Until Yesterday* and ourselves become traditional people. Jared Diamond shows how we might do so with authenticity and respect.

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