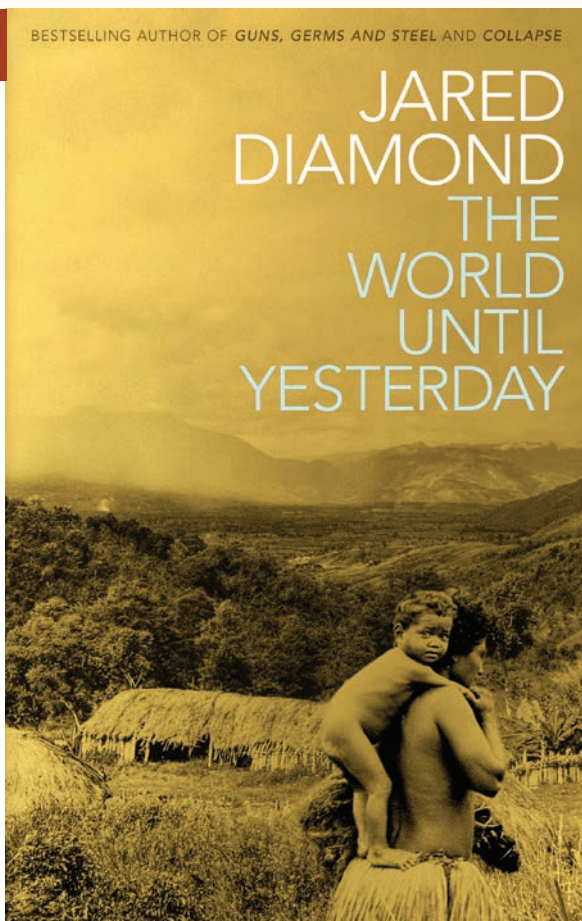


BOOK REVIEW

THE WORLD UNTIL YESTERDAY: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES?

by Jared Diamond

Review by Kemble Walker



In his latest instalment of popular science, Jared Diamond makes a suggestion to his readers. The audience is diverse, from the academic guilt of researchers, professors, and students, to casual shoppers in commercial bookstores. This grand hard-cover has a bold title in eye-catching gold: *The World Until Yesterday*. Like a true scientist, Diamond breaks down the suggestion in ordered fashion. The situation is set, the problem is diagnosed, and the solution proposed. Along the way, the supporting evidence is displayed and discussed, the scientific method providing an intellectual framework of scepticism where new information or analysis accords with the existing body of knowledge. The book represents a conservative dialectic, the mechanism by which a society's intellectual capital, like the Leviathan, can grow.

As such, we are in a world of orthodox language and style. The treatment of religion, for example, is uncontroversially atheist. The points are driven home like scientific fact, with the assumed supremacy of intellectual certainty. However, Diamond is reserved and polite, not wishing to offend a reader, or worse, to shock them. The restrained style partly obscures the tone of the book. Between the punctilious method, there is an urgent message: we are doing something wrong, and now is the time for change.

The World Until Yesterday calls for a reversal of policy. Traditionally, the public discourse in settler societies like the U.S. has treated 'natives' as if to be kept at the end of a barge pole.¹ Historically, politicians have put forward misinformation, inspired by political selfishness and a misguided sense of security.² Diamond has set the ball rolling in the other direction. The book contains a message which will excite and inspire those interested in Indigenous politics and law, and it carries considerable weight. Written with the full authority of the scientific establishment, the book is an official message from the academy, put in the form of a question: 'What can we learn from Traditional Societies?'

Reflecting on the state of the world, this message feels vital, imbued with sacred impetus. Diamond begins in an airport, a global symbol of enterprise and commerce, the ultimate step in imperial consumerism. All over the earth, people are struggling to cope under this pressure of expansion. Environmental and Indigenous activists are being outmanouvered by convoluted legal proceedings. Diplomacy is facilitated by multinational institutions like corporations, when considered from the perspective of an outsider. The world has been divided into nation states, organised according to their trade relations, economic

interests, and imperial affiliation. It is here that Diamond begins, introducing the division of space outside corporate democracy.

Diamond avoids politics, yet the book is extremely political. The recurring suggestion cuts across the progress of colonial expansion. It encourages us to respect the native a little more. With his demure style, Diamond escapes the label of activist. Instead, he encourages reconciliation by considering settler and native cultures on a horizontal standing. The book is devoted to exploring the whole spectrum of human societies, from small scale or ancient, to populous or modern.³ While I disagree with the association of 'small-scale' and 'ancient', 'populous' and 'modern', the project of bringing all societies into the scope of our consideration is admirable.

The book invites us to inhabit other worlds. Included in it are images of 47 remarkable colour plates, many of which are close up portraits that let the reader gaze eye-to-eye with Indigenous people. In this gallery are people of all ethnicities and cultures, white American included. The book is in a sense multi-media, with photos, history, science, all interspersed with stories about Diamond's travels in Papua New Guinea on bird-watching research. Of all the prose, the stories are most effective, the least overbearing, and the most compatible with the cultures in discussion.

The book's project is not only to develop a theoretical frame, but also a methodological analog for Indigenous ways of life. Diamond's choice to use stories is crucial. By talking about himself, he no longer dictates meanings about other people. The other sections of analysis appear unnecessarily authoritarian, repeating the tendency of colonial academics to view their own society as the pinnacle of human evolution. For this we have to thank Lewis Henry Morgan, an American lawyer and pioneering anthropologist whose book, *Ancient Societies* (1887), categorically enumerated the 'lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization' based on observations of lifestyle, technology and government.⁴ Morgan's implication was that all human history represented a movement towards American civilisation, of which he was a proud representative. Morgan in turn draws from Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* (1859), formed a new scientific model not just of natural history, but of time itself.⁵ The association of time with progress, obviously favourable to an agenda of economic growth, has achieved a totalising grip on public education. The more nuanced notions of cyclical time which better describe our earthly experience are rejected and ridiculed.

'Closed' systems alienate people who are accustomed to respecting individual initiative. The methodology of the United Nations ('UN') as well as that of most national governments is closed in that individual action requires the permission of a ruling class. Change is prevented if it does not resonate with existing policies. In other words, procedure is prioritised. For example, the United Nations Development Program has failed to accommodate Indigenous resistance to the REDD deforestation scheme.⁶ To petition the UN, individuals are required to learn the esoteric vocabulary of networking, public speaking, and hierarchy, and amongst the chaos, Indigenous messages are often ignored. For environmental and Indigenous activists, the process is disheartening and the results devastating.

The institutional inability to facilitate communication stems from self-importance. Psychologically speaking, Indigenous groups are often considered an interesting footnote in human history rather than living communities and cultures.⁷ The notion of 'indigeneity' appears in words and councils, yet Indigenous ways are stifled by the overbearing focus on administration. We might recognise Diamond's role in this, for his style is equally self-important. The orthodox approach reinforces the existing canon of knowledge, repeating the problems which inform policy-making bodies. The authoritarian, sectorised and hierarchical language of science and politics is unfriendly to ecological and social issues, which are in fact not separate.

For a pertinent comparison, we might look to another book about New Guinea, this time written by an Englishman in the 1920s, Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski's style is equally academic and rigorous, though his focus is not to dictate meaning and action, but enquire into it. His books *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922)⁸ and *The Sexual Lives of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929)⁹ explore Indigenous life far beyond the superficial level. Compared to Malinowski, Diamond stays much closer to the traditions of his own society, wielding the tools of the conquering colonial, dividing space, drawing conclusions, and presuming how other people feel. These are damaging tendencies which mar Indigenous politics and law. Can we forgive Diamond for writing 500 pages on Papua New Guinea and not once mentioning the current crisis in West Papua? Considering that the utterly unsustainable thrust for oil makes possible Diamond's comfortable life in Los Angeles, this blindness is embarrassing if not inexcusable.

But Diamond knows he is not a perfect Indigenous person. He recognises that full commitment to this cause is elusive. He is, at times, self-deprecating about his

inability to behave like his Indigenous friends, relating, for example, a time when their boat sank. He panicked, incapacitated with fear while his friends swam about collecting cargo and keeping him afloat. His mind and body malfunctioned, trembling for his life and thinking of his family, trapped inside their own frame of reference. Waiting to be rescued, his friends tread water to support his sodden weight, floundering in the circular thinking of closed organisations. How about removing your shoes? How about learning to tread water? Instead, Diamond prioritises himself, fearing for death and musing on his family's grief. Like a closed organisation, he repeats this procedure rather than taking action to alleviate the situation. The story is endearing, but it highlights the key limitation of Diamond's work. Though he makes efforts towards it, he is ultimately unable to actually adopt the techniques and knowledge of his Indigenous friends.

What Diamond misses is the extra spark of creativity and freedom which lets Indigenous ideas and feelings pass through the permeable membrane of our subjectivity and become incorporated as part of our selves. The unfamiliar becoming familiar, the object becoming subject, the interplay of light and dark which is celebrated in ritual, late night dance halls, the magnetism of human attraction, male and female, wrong and right. Each dichotomy of opposites forms a polarity, and placed together they combine into the dynamic circle of life, known graphically as the mandala, settlers and natives in a harmonised integration of opposites, where difference is also similarity and we all have our place around the fire. Call it crazy or amazing, it will be everyday thinking when we all unite.

On the spiritual and religious plane, we receive Diamond's most profound observation—all religion is false. In uncharacteristically supernatural style, he imagines arriving on Earth from the Andromeda galaxy, and, seeing a range of incompatible religions, he comes to the simple conclusion that each is a subjective creation of its participants. The new model of open participation reveals organised religion to be a political scam. It shatters the awkwardness of orthodoxy. Anything is allowed, there are no wrong answers here, only your best attempt at communicating whatever intent you desire. Black is white, wrong is right, the strange becomes normal, and opposites merge into themselves. Together in ceremony and celebration, all movements and thoughts become part of the group, and any individual change will affect the whole dynamic. Each person is involved in the evolution of the group, and in this state we can achieve anything.

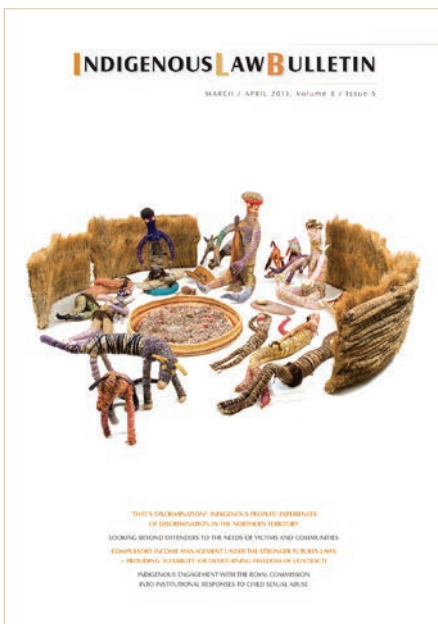
With the present day realities of colonialism, immigration and international trade, the solutions to our problems will require an open-hearted acceptance of all people, opinions, and cultures. By adjusting our gaze towards traditional ways of life, Diamond points us in the right direction, away from economic explosion and environmental doom. It is the same message of reform, radical theory, and protest which has surfaced in all great thinkers, and now it is reaching an ever expanding public audience, in Turkey, in Brazil, on the Internet, worldwide. For anyone interested in change, the time has come. Now we start imagining what next.

Kemble Walker is an undergraduate in Anthropology at Columbia University in the City of New York.

- 1 Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Putnam, 1973).
- 2 Vine Deloria, *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Macmillan, 1969).
- 3 Jared M Diamond, *The World until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (Viking, 2012).
- 4 Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Belknap of Harvard UP) 1964.
- 5 Charles Darwin and David Quammen, *On the Origin of Species* (Sterling, 2008).
- 6 Megan Rowling, 'UN-REDD Seeks to Calm Row with Panama Indigenous Body', *Thomas Reuters Foundation* (online), 13 June 2013 <<http://www.trust.org/item/20130613101635-20e7k/>>.
- 7 Vine, above n 1.
- 8 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific; an Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Routledge & Sons, 1922).
- 9 Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia; an Ethnographic Account of Courtship, Marriage, and Family Life among the Natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea* (Beacon, 1929).



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