



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

By Jared Diamond

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The bestselling author of *Collapse* and *Guns, Germs, and Steel* surveys the history of human societies to answer the question: What can we learn from traditional societies that can make the world a better place for all of us?

“As he did in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond continues to make us think with his mesmerizing and absorbing new book.” Bookpage

Most of us take for granted the features of our modern society, from air travel and telecommunications to literacy and obesity. Yet for nearly all of its six million years of existence, human society had none of these things. While the gulf that divides us from our primitive ancestors may seem unbridgeably wide, we can glimpse much of our former lifestyle in those largely traditional societies still or recently in existence. Societies like those of the New Guinea Highlanders remind us that it was only yesterday—in evolutionary time—when everything changed and that we moderns still possess bodies and social practices often better adapted to traditional than to modern conditions. *The World Until Yesterday* provides a mesmerizing firsthand picture of the human past as it had been for millions of years—a past that has mostly vanished—and considers what the differences between that past and our present mean for our lives today.

This is Jared Diamond’s most personal book to date, as he draws extensively from his decades of field work in the Pacific islands, as well as evidence from Inuit, Amazonian Indians, Kalahari San people, and others. Diamond doesn’t romanticize traditional societies—after all, we are shocked by some of their practices—but he finds that their solutions to universal human problems such as child rearing, elder care, dispute resolution, risk, and physical fitness have much to teach us. Provocative, enlightening, and entertaining, *The World Until Yesterday* is an essential and fascinating read.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #67802 in Books
- Brand: Penguin Books
- Published on: 2013-10-29
- Released on: 2013-10-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.40" h x 1.14" w x 5.40" l, .99 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 512 pages

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

In the broader scope of evolution, it was only “yesterday” 11,000 years ago when we progressed from hunter-gatherer groups to modern states. Along the way, we’ve changed the ways we resolve disputes, raise children, care for the old, practice faith, nourish ourselves, communicate, and a host of other mundane and monumental human activities. Diamond, author of the highly acclaimed *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1999) and *Collapse* (2005), offers a penetrating look at the ways we have evolved by comparing practices of traditional societies and modern and industrialized societies. Diamond draws on his fieldwork in New Guinea, the Amazon, Kalahari, and other areas to compare the best and most questionable customs and practices of societies past and present. Diamond does not idealize traditional societies, with smaller populations and more interest in maintaining group harmony than modern societies organized by governments seeking to maintain order, but he does emphasize troubling trends in declining health and fitness as industrialization has spread to newly developing nations. In this fascinating book, Diamond brings fresh perspective to historic and contemporary ways of life with an eye toward those that are likely to enhance our future. **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** Publicity and television and media appearances will be full-throttle for Diamond, an acclaimed scholar and best-selling writer and opinion-shaper. --Vanessa Bush

From Bookforum

Unlike his earlier books, *The World Until Yesterday* is not concerned with constructing grand theories of historical change. Yet when his conceptual assumptions do surface, Diamond reveals his continuing debt to contemporary conventional wisdom. He remains in thrall to neoliberal politics and pop-evolutionary biological determinism. He seems characteristically unaware of the huge historical and anthropological literature complicating the categories of the traditional and the modern. His understanding of modern societies is thin, superficial, and overgeneralized: He ignores differences created by culture and political economy, making no distinctions among neoliberal capitalism, social democracy, and the authoritarian hybrids emerging in such places as China and Singapore. The ideas are muddled and unclear, but the strategy is a familiar one in Big Picture arguments: Evolutionary theory—or some crude facsimile of it—is trundled onstage to provide legitimacy for an author’s claims, regardless of whether the theory has any actual power to illuminate the subject in question. —Jackson Lears

Review

“As he did in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond continues to make us think with his mesmerizing and absorbing new book. In *The World Until Yesterday*, he pushes us to reconsider the contours of human society and the forces that have shaped human culture [...] Powerful and captivating, Diamond’s lucid insights challenge our ideas about human nature and culture, and will likely provoke heated conversations about the future of our society.”

—*Book Page*

“Challenging and smart...By focusing his infectious intellect and incredible experience on nine broad areas - - peace and war, young and old, danger and response, religion, language and health -- and sifting through thousands of years of customs across 39 traditional societies, Diamond shows us many features of the past that we would be wise to adopt.”

--*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“*The World Until Yesterday* [is] a fascinating and valuable look at what the rest of us have to learn from –

and perhaps offer to – our more traditional kin.”

--*Christian Science Monitor*

“Ambitious and erudite, drawing on Diamond's seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of fields such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, physiology, nutrition and evolutionary biology. Diamond is a Renaissance man, a serious scholar and an audacious generalist, with a gift for synthesizing data and theories.”

--*The Chicago Tribune*

“As always, Diamond manages to combine a daring breadth of scope, rigorous technical detail and personal anecdotes that are often quite moving.”

--*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Diamond’s investigation of a selection of traditional societies, and within them a selection of how they contend with various issues [...] is leisurely but not complacent, informed but not claiming omniscience [...] A symphonic yet unromantic portrait of traditional societies and the often stirring lessons they offer.”--*Kirkus*, Starred Review

“In this fascinating book, Diamond brings fresh perspective to historic and contemporary ways of life with an eye toward those that are likely to enhance our future.”—*Booklist*

“Lyrical and harrowing, this survey of traditional societies reveals the surprising truth that modern life is a mere snippet in the long narrative of human endeavor [...] This book provides a lifetime of distilled experience but offers no simple lessons.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Jared Diamond has done it again. Surveying a great range of anthropological literature and integrating it with vivid accounts of a lifetime of visits—sometimes harrowing, more often exhilarating—to highland New Guinea, he holds up a needed mirror to our culture and civilization. The reflection is not always flattering, but it is always worth looking at with an honest, intelligent eye. Diamond does that and more.”

--Melvin Konner, author of *The Tangled Wing: and The Evolution of Childhood*

*“This is the most personal of Diamond’s books, a natural follow-up to his brilliant *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Diamond has very extensive and long-term field experience with New Guineans, and stories of these admirable people enrich his overview of how all human beings acted until very recently. Not only are his accounts fascinating, they will ring true to all who have experience with hunter-gatherer cultures. And they carry many lessons for modern societies as well on everything from child-rearing to general health. *The World Until Yesterday* is a triumph.”*

--Paul R. Ehrlich, author of *Human Natures*

“*The World Until Yesterday* is another eye-opening and completely enchanting book by one of our major intellectual forces, as a writer, a thinker, a scientist, a human being. It’s a rare treasure, both as an illuminating personal memoir and an engrossing look into the heart of traditional societies and the timely lessons they can offer us. Its unique spell is irresistible.”

--Diane Ackerman, author of *The Zookeeper’s Wife*

“An incredible insightful journey into the knowledge and experiences of peoples in traditional societies. Diamond’s literary adventure reflects on the problems of today in light of his exhaustive literature review and 40 plus years of living with rural New Guinean peoples.”

--Barry Hewlett, author of *Intimate Fathers* (with Michael Lamb)

“In the 19th century Charles Darwin's trilogy—*On the Origin of Species*, *The Descent of Man*, and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* changed forever our understanding of our nature and our history. A century from now scholars will make a similar assessment of Jared Diamond's trilogy: *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, *Collapse*, and now *The World Until Yesterday*, his magnificent concluding opus on not only our nature and our history, but our destiny as a species. Jared Diamond is the Charles Darwin of our generation, and *The World Until Yesterday* is an epoch-changing work that offers us hope through real-life solutions to our most pressing problems.”

--Michael Shermer, Publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, author of *The Believing Brain* and *Why Darwin Matters*

Users Review

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Christopher Clarke:

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