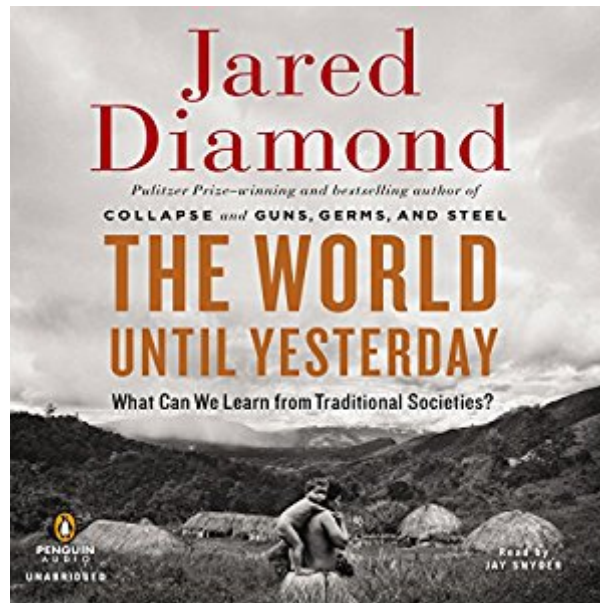


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The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?



Synopsis

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, Indian, 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. A characteristically provocative, enlightening, and entertaining book, *The World until Yesterday* will be essential and delightful listening.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 18 hours 31 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Penguin Audio

Audible.com Release Date: December 31, 2012

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00AE9V8QW

Best Sellers Rank: #4 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Australia & Oceania #7 in Books > History > Australia & Oceania > Oceania #30 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > World

Customer Reviews

Bottom Line First: Jared Diamond's *The World Before Yesterday* is Ok. Diamond struck gold with *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed: Revised Edition* which was better than his Pulitzer Prize winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* but here he has lost his mojo. *The World Before Yesterday* may pass as a backup read to go with a better undergraduate text in a real anthropology class or as a discussion starter for non-anthropologists but otherwise I am not sure who is the best audience for this book. Diamond makes a few good points, especially towards the end when he discusses how we in the modern or as he phrases it the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) world might improve our diet to avoid modern world non-contagious diseases like hypertension and diabetes. Otherwise this is a collection of more or less well documented observations about how he thinks human society used to work before the centralized state. It is good to know that in the WEIRD world we are less likely to kill each other, no matter how industrialized and deadly modern warfare has become. Then again he was writing without considering the new cycles of killing in modern killing growing from the asymmetric warfare based on revenge killing motivated by religious hatreds. A failing in this regard is a failing to redo some of his observations by cross tabbing analysis between societies given to ancient cycles of warfare and ancient attitudes towards strangers and traders. A personal measure of my reaction to *Yesterday* is the fact that I had originally read it when it was first published about 5 years ago. I had entirely forgotten reading it and was well into re reading it when I remembered anything from the first read. That is it is mostly a forgettable book. His advice about adopting the Paleolithic diet or the Mediterranean diet or at least the Italian habit of eating slowly may still have the support of qualified medical opinion, but as a taint of food fad about it. Certainly it is no long out of the box thinking that in the modern diet we eat too much sugar and too much processed food. Though in the case of processed food, we may just need a better set of definitions. In the case of so called organic food, a term Diamond wisely avoids, one cannot be certain what it means other than expensive. Against the criticism from the world of anthropology that Diamond gives too much weight to differences in climate. Diamond's argument reads like the same economics argued by the folks behind *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. Look at the win loss analysis for a given type of cultural response and that is how that culture will develop, Diamond argues the math behind the cultivation of widely separate plots of land against the obvious efficiency of working one large plot. The inefficient scattered plots pay off better in the case of crop failure and so that strategy wins. I do not dislike *The World Before Yesterday*, much of Diamond's thoughts are well argued. Mostly it lacks the clarity of purpose in the two earlier works. For all of its deliberate organization and systematic class room

lecture style, it rambles and seems to be at cross purposes. Pre-state subsistence societies do have something to teach modern societies. Humans can learn from predator animals and flowering plants and the stars in the sky and from almost anything. I am not sure I can recommend all of those implied books or get too excited about this one.

In two previous books Jared Diamond has explored how a fortunate confluence of advantages allowed Europeans to be the ones who largely conquered the world ("Guns, Germs, and Steel"), and how societies can be driven to collapse either by over exploiting their environment or by climate change that is more rapid than they can adjust to ("Collapse"). Now he tackles how people lived (and in some pockets still live) before "civilization" as we know it today arose. Once again Diamond demonstrates broad knowledge and a capacity to draw features of multiple societies together into a better understanding of humans as a species. While I admire Diamond, some of his beliefs and conclusions are open to debate, and should not be taken uncritically. Anthropology is not an exact science, and reasonable, knowledgeable people can draw different conclusions from the same facts, with no way to test and prove one or another interpretation as correct. As I will explain, there are many arguments in this book I find compelling, but others where I think Diamond reaches too far. But anyone reading this book with an open mind will learn much about our species, and be challenged to consider a new way of looking at how people lived "until yesterday". As will be expected by readers with Diamond experience, a lot of the book happens in New Guinea, where Diamond has made many trips to study the birds (he is, among other things, an ornithologist) and has many friends. Those of us who have read his prior books recognize his affinity for the people of New Guinea. Despite some protests to the contrary, it is not hard to get the impression that Diamond really enjoys their company more than that of Americans and other westerners. At times he seems somewhat prejudiced toward their social structures, although he also appears to recognize this and tries to resist putting them on too high a pedestal. But we all have a view of the world that we can't completely escape, so it's not fair to criticize Diamond too harshly for being, well, human. The first interesting observation of the book is that until recently, and still in some areas, people rarely if ever encountered strangers. They encountered friends and they encountered enemies. But nearly everyone they encountered came from their group or a neighboring group, be that group friendly or hostile. Travelers were rare, and couldn't count on a warm welcome. In populated areas today we pass strangers every day and think nothing of it. We walk into shops and think nothing of exchanging pleasantries with people we've never met before. We travel long distances, and expect to be welcomed upon arrival. None of this happened a few thousand years

ago. Before the dawn of agriculture there were no large scale societies, because no land could support a dense population. There were also no governments, no police forces, no courts, and no armies. People worked out their differences, or they killed each other. When a bad interaction happened, intentionally or accidentally, a customary gesture of restoration might defuse the situation. Or a cycle of tit-for-tat killings might begin, and might continue for generations. In a modern states wars occur only intermittently and, horrible as they can be, have a limited death toll. Hunter gatherer societies were often trapped in a cycle of violence and warfare with neighboring groups vying for the same resources. They often employed true total warfare, all against all, with the losers exterminated and their land appropriated. (The women might be taken as wives. The men died in the fight and the children were killed.) The details vary from region to region, and Diamond provides a variety of examples. But when small groups of people have to eke out subsistence from a reluctant environment, neighboring groups can be as much an enemy as carnivores and drought. He also notes the similarity to chimpanzee behavior--the seeds have not fallen so far from the tree. By one calculation chimpanzee death rates due to warfare are similar to those in hunter gatherer societies! (Another Diamond book is "The Third Chimpanzee", about our similarities with and our differences from our cousins the chimps and bonobos.) He also notes that while modern societies suppress the thirst for revenge, it doesn't go away. Hunter gatherers kill their enemies as part of their life, and go on with the other parts. We train soldiers to kill, but mostly tell them not to, creating a tension not common in hunter gatherer societies. Diamond has a lot to offer on the differences in child rearing between traditional and modern societies. He notes that most modern research is focused on WEIRD (western educated industrial rich democracies) societies. (The term and concept are not original to him.) In fact, there is a tendency to generalize what professors and students in universities believe to everyone. He thinks highly of the "allo-parenting" that occurs in hunter gatherer societies, where other adults and even older children help rear, protect, and teach younger children. He sees it as helping to develop social skills, and it probably does, but especially for the type of society those children live in. (More of this occurs in rural areas and small towns in the west than in more urban areas, such as Southern California, where both Diamond and I live.) Yet, for all the advantages he sees in the hunter gatherer lifestyle, Diamond notes that given the choice they choose to adopt a western lifestyle. They do so because living like "us" is simply easier and less risky than being a hunter gatherer. He discusses the theory of religion, which will offend some people and interest others. He frames the value of religion in terms of defusing anxiety and making people feel better about their situation, in particular giving meaning to what seems meaningless. Diamond notes that religion can be used to explain to believers how "thou shall not

kill" can become "thou must kill" under certain circumstances as determined by authorities. A distinction can be made between killing co-believers and nonbelievers. He also discusses how the success of a religion doesn't depend on its being true, it depends on its ability to motivate adherents to conceive children and win converts. (Unsurprisingly, religions that discourage procreation end up as historical footnotes.) A big selling point of a religion is its ability to deliver a functioning society. Toward the end of the book Diamond becomes a bit polemical for my taste. His penultimate chapter (ignoring the epilogue) is a pitch for multilingualism. Now I have nothing against multilingualism, and wish languages came more easily to me. But I feel he stretches his arguments too far. After somewhat poo-pooing studies that suggest various intellectual activities slow brain decay and the onset of Alzheimer's disease, he uses similar studies on bi- or multilingualism to argue their benefit. He notes that most New Guineans speak several languages while most Americans speak only one. Europeans often speak several, but he describes that as a mostly post WWII development. But there are differences between New Guinea and the industrialized world. If you live in a group of a few dozen people speaking an unwritten language it makes a lot of sense to expend effort in learning the languages of neighboring groups. If you live in a country where millions of people speak, read, and write a written language it makes sense to learn to read, write, and do business in that language. And such languages are likely to have much larger vocabularies. In a language spoken by a small number of people who interact frequently, when a word stops being used it leaves the vocabulary. In a language spoken by millions of people over a large territory words leave the language less frequently, are picked up more frequently, and old words live on in writing. I say this not intending to disparage the learning of hunter gatherers, but rather to note that both they and we expend our energy in learning what helps us prosper in our circumstances. Diamond becomes very polemical in his defense of dying languages. There is a balance between the loss of cultural history when a language is lost and the advantage of more people being able to communicate directly. It is one thing to eradicate a living language. Yet much of what Diamond discusses is what he calls "moribund" languages, where a few elders speak a language, but no children are learning it. But if the elders don't see a reason to teach it to the children, is the loss so great (other than in an academic sense)? Maybe here the wisdom of the people exceeds the wisdom of the professor. He then has a chapter which is a pretty conventional discussion of the problems with the modern diet, especially excessive salt and sugar intake. Our lifestyle has changed a lot faster than our physiology, with some detrimental effects. The epilogue has a curious section in which he quotes kids coming to the US from other cultures and criticizing our culture. It's a bit odd and gratuitous, actually, given his earlier admission that, given the choice,

hunter gatherers abandon their lifestyle for a western one. He backtracks a bit from there, but I can't escape the sense that he feels the need to polish the traditional experience after revealing many of its challenges. A fascinating book with a lot of information. But the author's heart sometimes gets in the way of his head. Very worth reading, but worth reading critically. I was provided a copy for review by the publisher, but have ordered a copy of the finished product for my library.

The first chapters are excellent and informative. The stories tend to get a little repetitive although they are all interesting. Mr Diamond knows as much about this material as anyone. The book changes its focus with the chapter on religion. He is not a historian and is not knowledgeable about the history of religion or the lack of it. The chapter turns into an argument for atheism. No mention is made that the greatest murderers in history were atheists: Hitler, Lenin and Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot and many others. The remainder of the book is better. The epilogue about primitive and civilized societies has been dealt with by others. Not as good as his other books.

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