The Tropical Bookshelf

Breakfast with Jared

It's a cloudy day in May, and I am visiting Jared Diamond in his neo-Georgian house near UCLA. The kitchen table is laden with golden raspberries, jewel-like tomatoes, Greek yogurt, and honeyed halvah. For a moment, I miss the rabbit (now deceased) that once lived in a hutch at the end of the room. But the tiny grief passes quickly. Far more engrossing is the man before me: a scholar and friend I have known for 20 plus years.

On this morning, our meeting is social; I don't recall the conversation. What I do recall is Jared's delight upon spying a FedEx envelope at his front door as we are saying goodbye. "Aah!" he cries, "the jacket for the American edition!" That's when he, his wife Marie, and I first view its grave fonts and black-and-white photo of a New Guinea highlander and naked child against a moody, mountainous backdrop. The work's evocative title? "*The World Until Yesterday—What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*"

Another book he was born to write, I think to myself.

DIAMOND REDUX

Jared Mason Diamond, geography professor, environmental historian, and author, requires little introduction to many of you. But here's a bio anyway. After studying membrane physiology at Harvard and Cambridge University, the mid-70s academic launched his career as a noted gallbladder expert. His vistas soon broadened. His bibliography reflects his lifelong love of ornithology and his kaleidoscopic curiosity, polymath mind, and penchant for tackling really big ideas. Past books include: "*Avifauna of the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea*" (1972), "*The Third Chimpanzee*" (1992), "*Why Sex is Fun*" (1997), "*Guns, Germs and Steel—The Fates of Human Societies*" (1998), and "*Collapse—How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*" (2005). Among Diamond's many honors are a MacArthur "genius" grant, a Pulitzer, and a National Medal of Science. An adventurous man, he still treks to New Guinea every summer. Back at UCLA, he personally delivers every lecture in his two yearly undergraduate courses.

In truth, it's hard to connect controversy with someone so generous and deliciously quirky. (In his house, my pal cups his hands and pipes tropical bird calls in lieu of using an intercom and often greets visitors wearing big, furry slippers.) And yet, "*Guns, Germs and Steel*"—Diamond's Pulitzer Prize-winning book which decisively links Euro-Asian hegemony with chance factors of environment and geography—has critics. Some people believe Diamond's thesis has a racist or determinist slant. Others argue it overlooks the evolution of Western cultural and social values, notably individualism, capitalism, and political freedom. Cavils aside, to many with a yen for discerning intersecting planes between agriculture, animal and human infectious diseases, geo-political dominance, and economic and technologic progress, it's an epic, revered work.

"*Collapse*" explores peoples and states whose civilizations at one time shattered (examples include the Greenland Norse, Easter Islanders, Pitcairn Polynesians, the Anasazi of the American Southwest, the Maya, and Rwanda, Haiti, China,

and Australia). "Diamond-esque" in its use of lists, the work describes five historical triggers of collapse—climate change, hostile neighbors, loss of vital trading partners, environmental decay, and the failure to recognize the latter—as well as a dozen looming disasters (think deforestation, water and energy shortages, overhunting, overfishing, and overpopulation, among others). "*Collapse*" echoes the belief which laces through Arnold J. Toynbee's "*A Study of History*" that civilizations die by suicide, not murder, and challenges readers to resist adaptive change at their peril. Required reading, one might say, for anyone under 50.

This leads us to the new book. "*The World Until Yesterday*," scheduled for release in the United States on December 31, 2012, has two key premises: 1) in Diamond's words, that "traditional lifestyles are what shaped us and caused us to be what we are now," and 2) over millennia, Homo sapiens have conducted a raft of experiments—some good, some clearly bad—in running human societies. The book is divided into five parts: Setting the Stage by Dividing Space; Peace and War; Young and Old; Danger and Response; and Religion, Language and Health. In short, it has something for everyone.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

I don't think I'm giving away too much by divulging details of the Prologue ("At the Airport") and Epilogue ("At Another Airport") of Diamond's new work. The opening locale—noisy, bustling, and jostling in the manner of all modern airports, it seems—is at first deceptively generic. Then, we see the exotic national flag and strange-named destinations of connecting flights and learn we are in Port Moresby, circa 2006. Diamond neatly segues to these remarks:

"To anyone with a sense of New Guinea's history—including me who first came to Papua New Guinea in 1964 when it was still administered by Australia—the scene was at once familiar, astonishing, and moving. I found myself mentally comparing [it to] . . . photographs taken by the first Australians to enter and "discover" New Guinea's Highlands in 1931, teeming with a million villagers still then using stone tools."

" . . . New Guinea Highland societies in 1931 lacked not just manufactured clothing but also all modern technologies, from clocks, phones, and credit cards to computers, escalators, and airplanes. More fundamentally, the New Guinea Highlanders of 1931 lacked writing, metal, money, schools, and centralized government. If we hadn't actually had recent history to tell us the result, we might have wondered: could a society without writing really master it within a single generation?"

Then, while observing the diversity of culture within traditional societies vis-a-vis WEIRD states (what a great acronym, non? It stands for "Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic"), Diamond dispassionately presents the other side of the coin:

"Many traditional practices are ones that we can consider ourselves lucky to have discarded—such as infanticide, abandoning or killing elderly people, facing periodic risk

of starvation, being at heightened risk from environmental dangers and infectious diseases, often seeing one's children die, and living in constant fear of being attacked."

Four hundred and fifty pages later we are steeped in examples and insights, contrasts and comparisons from numerous societies about systems of government and justice, conflict resolution, tribal and modern warfare, risk aversion and constructive paranoia (don't imagine for a minute, Diamond reminds us, that the !Kung of Africa's Kalahari Desert enjoy driving groups of lions and hyenas off freshly-killed animal carcasses using small weapons, sticks, and shouts—they do it because they need the meat to survive), child-raising, care of the aged, near-constant fear of starvation (and its ricochet in today's global epidemics of diabetes and hypertension), purposes of religion, and the protective benefits of bilingualism.

In the Epilogue (which opens with Diamond reuniting with family members at an LAX baggage claim area, then traveling the 405 freeway and confronting stacks of accumulated mail), readers will find a summing-up which carefully weighs certain advantages of the modern world, certain advantages of the traditional world, and lessons for all.

After turning the final page, I scheduled another breakfast with Jared. From here on, all quotes are from our later conversation in October 2012.

QUESTION TIME

"Was this your most personal book?"

"Not just my most personal . . . but most practical book, which people can use to modify their lives [in terms of] danger, bringing up children, getting older."

"I want to hear about your first contact with a traditional society. What was it like?"

"I grew up in Boston, my parents didn't camp out, I had an unadventurous life. From a friend at Harvard I learned to camp out but neither of us had been to the tropics. After we both got our PhDs and I returned to Boston, John and I immediately began asking ourselves: where can we go in the tropics? Our first trip was to Peru. Afterwards we said, 'Peru was wonderful,' now what's the wildest, most adventurous place we can go? Of course it was New Guinea at the time. My dad had mentored and supervised Carleton Gadjusek who recognized kuru as an infectious disease. I had met Carleton and was fascinated by his stories . . ."

"Before John and I went out there [in 1964], I was really naive. I knew New Guineans were primitive people, meaning that they had primitive technology. I thought there would be something distinctive about their personality and cognition, and so on—I fantasized for example, that New Guineans could read minds and that, in a few weeks, I could learn how to read minds. That just shows you how naive I was."

"My first night in New Guinea . . . a [local] physician in the kuru area was eager to get me and John out of his hands as quickly as possible. Instead of easing us in our first night by letting us stay in his house, he told us a bit and drove us to a native village and left us there! So my first night was spent sleeping in a hut in a village with New Guineans who did not speak English. I did not speak Fore; I did not yet speak Pidgin English (neo-Melanesian). I was tired from the long plane flights from the US, so I slept late the next morning. When I woke up there was the scene that I

describe in the book about the little boys playing war. War had ended in this area in 1959. So they were not playing hopscotch, it was serious, it was very realistic. They were using small bows and arrows, they were darting back and forth, they were doing what the adults do in war. It was clear that this was training. This was my first morning in the New Guinea highlands."

"The second night I went down to the village stream to brush my teeth and a New Guinean was there. I had already on that first day started asking the names for things in Fore and I saw a frog and I pointed and the person said "dakwo." So I got the word "dakwo" for frog. On the second night I heard a frog croaking, [saw the man at the stream], and thought: 'Aha! Human bond! I've learned a word of his language!' 'Dakwo!' I cried. The man shook his head [vigorously] in response. 'Ibisaraya!' It was not a dakwo; it was a different frog, an ibisaraya. This was my first exposure to New Guinean knowledge of natural history."

"Were you ever scared?"

"No. I was with my friend John. People in this area had been pacified, hadn't attacked Europeans in quite a while. But, in retrospect, it was more dangerous than I realized."

"Examples?"

"One time we were deserted by our carriers in the jungle with a half-ton of equipment. We had shotguns (we didn't use them) . . . but it was difficult to get to another village and get carriers. There was a situation where I found that natives were stealing birds from our mist nets and then reselling them to us. I suspected this and I finally got proof. I was angry. I was alone in camp surrounded by New Guineans. We could not operate if they were going to steal birds from our nets. In the presence of other New Guineans, I took a bow and arrow and broke them over my knee. I got away with it . . . but I would never do that now."

"As a doctor's son, you must have been aware of the heavy burden of disease."

"Whatever I learned from Dad . . . was wiped out by the fact I was 26, full of bravado, and ignorant. In fact, my hygiene standards were not as paranoid as now. Consequently, I collapsed with dysentery and fever two weeks after arrival. I got malaria on my third trip after sleeping under a bednet with a hole in it. Today I would not sleep under that tent without patching it."

"Claire, I did not really learn until a near-fatal boat accident. By that time, I had been visiting New Guinea for more than 15 years. I was a slow learner."

"Do you feel a desire to help or any moral imperative when you meet traditional people and see vast disparities in their quality of life [as compared to ours]?"

"No, because I would consider such a moral imperative on anyone's part a bad idea. Because well-intentioned policies so often backfire, I would consider it a mistake not just on my part but on anyone's part to try to change a society."

"I don't know what changes are going to work out well. I've just seen so many changes in New Guinea that have backfired. Here's an example. What could be more obvious than providing education? The Australian colonial administration put a lot of effort into education. It's not that one shouldn't educate New Guineans; of course you should educate New Guineans. But the approach of the Australians consisted of requiring all young New Guineans to have a few years of primary school—a noble, worthy ideal, but it backfired."

"The tragedy ... was a double tragedy. The first tragedy was that a few years of primary school do you little good: they don't let you get a job. But a few years of primary school do take you out of the gardens when traditional New Guineans are learning to become farmers—and learning to become a farmer really is difficult. New Guinea friends of mine who went to school told me that when they came back to their villages, they didn't know what sweet potato to plant on what slope. The tragedy was that a few years of universal education was not enough to provide jobs but it was enough to undermine their ability to operate in New Guinea society."

"Let's look 50 years hence. Obviously languages are disappearing; the world will no longer exist in such a way that people can remain isolated. What will it be like for traditional societies?"

"There's a huge spectrum of possible outcomes. One possible outcome: if we in the first world mess up our own society, mess up the whole world ... and you ask yourself who is going to be left after 50 years, well all of us here who don't know how to make stone tools, don't know what to gather, all of us here are going to starve to death. The places in the world where people will survive are the places where—within living memory—people have been living in the forest and making their own gardens."

"So, in one scenario, 50 years from now, New Guinea and parts of the Amazon will be the best functioning places in the world because the rest of us will be dead or incompetent."

"Other scenarios? New Guinea is developing. There's a big natural gas project of which Exxon Mobil is in charge, so a lot of money is flowing in. In Papua New Guinea as in other countries where lots of money is [now] flowing in, the social mechanisms for making use of money are not in place and the money is not paid to individuals but to village leaders. But village leaders do not have 3,000 years of experience of state government that says that village leaders are supposed to represent their people, so a lot of money gets wasted ... It's therefore possible that in Papua New Guinea as in many other parts of the world, the hope people feel now will not materialize."

"Do you see remnants of stateless societies in so-called modern settings?"

"Yes, they are all around us in rural areas of the United States. In Montana, for example, if neighbors have a dispute, they don't hire lawyers; they deal with disputes by tribal mechanisms. Here's another example. When I went to England in the 1950s, much of village life was essentially tribal. Everyone knew everybody. Everything was in public view. Many people spent their lives within one or two miles of where they were born. That's why the title 'World Until Yesterday.' Much of yesterday is still with us."

ON WRITING ... AND WHAT'S NEXT

Diamond is a great listener and note-taker. For more than two decades, I have watched him fill sheaves of paper in longhand, whether jotting down admonitions for healthy travel or—a few years back—myriad facts he (and another UCLA colleague and I) fashioned into a paper for *Nature* about how temperate and tropical zoonotic pathogens transform into pathogens exclusively infecting humans (Wolfe N, Panosian Dunavan C, Diamond J, 2007). Although largely un-entranced with 21st century gizmos (Diamond on computers: "I do not know how to turn the bloody thing on!"), organizing all sorts of information and making lists—from birds seen on a given day to all of the World War II Japanese battleships—are favorite pastimes. It's tempting to think this skill makes writing a book an enjoyable, albeit complex game. There's far more to it, of course. Diamond invests long hours researching chapters, then solicits detailed feedback on his drafts from colleagues, experts, and friends.

How long does it take for Diamond to complete a new book? On average, seven years. During which time, he's also thinking ahead.

"By the time I finish one book, I've already figured out my next. After *'Collapse'*, I explored the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach, which I love ('can I write a bestseller?' I asked myself; publishers dashed that fantasy!), and a book about creativity. Then a personal book about New Guinea grew on me. Eventually, it morphed from something autobiographical to ... lots of observations about tribes-people around the world."

So now you may be wondering: does she know Diamond's next book topic? As a matter of fact, I do. But I've promised to keep it to myself. My motives are selfish, I confess. More breakfasts with Jared.

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