

THE WORLD BEFORE YESTERDAY

In *The World Before Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?* (498pp, Allen Lane Publishers, 2012) Jared Diamond describes how hunter gatherer and subsistence farming societies dealt with trade, war, child rearing, justice, etc. He does not, though, say much about what moderns can learn from them. He also often fails to remind us that these traditional societies have by 2012 been incorporated into modern states for half a century or more. (The Highland New Guineans he knows best, for instance, having been contacted by Australians in 1931.) Instead, he speaks of them as if they were in 2012 as they were before contact.

Finally, he ignores completely “advanced” societies’ often unspeakably rapacious absorption of traditional societies – a feature of his earlier book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

Before traditional societies become states, through population increase, developing political hierarchies and intensified food production, they have no writing, metal, money, schools, centralized government, overweight folks, or folks ill from non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Trading is a personal exchange -- mutual gift giving for status, admiration, cementing group relations, insurance of help in needy times – never simply economic.

Settling disputes involves food, gifts, shared grieving, always among people known to each other, and aimed to restore friendly or neutral relations -- not to seek justice through intermediaries. Justice is do-it-yourself, sometimes

including revenge -- and not aimed to maintain the society's stability.

In war, traditional combatants see each other as non-human, though often sharing a language and culture. Battles may be fought by appointment, some kept, some not; they last usually a day at a time, and may be called off by rain. There are many combatants and relatively few casualties, with infrequent massacres. They're fought to secure resources or, more often, to seek revenge – an eye for an eye.

Traditional women tend to keep infants in bodily contact for long periods, to suckle them many times, day and night, and to carry them so they see the world mom sees. Once children are weaned, aunts, uncles and neighbors may parent them as often as the parents themselves do. Adoption is a routine way of bonding groups, and quick response diminishes crying. Cherishing of individual autonomy means less physical punishment and less responsibility for kids – even for their safety. Multi-age play groups assure rapid socialization, and games stress sharing, not competing. Learning in general is inseparable from social life.

Traditionalists include elders in daily activities and even grant them special privileges for their knowledge and skills – as long as the group has food, isn't at war or forced to travel. Then elders may (like infants) be abandoned or killed.

Religion may explain the universe, defuse anxiety, or create organization and obedience – important among traditionalists and less so now; it may provide comfort and shape attitudes toward strangers – less important earlier and

more so now; or it may justify war and create badges of commitment -- functions important to the present.

Traditionalists may speak up to 15 languages, Europeans 2-3, and Americans, one. Multilinguists solve complex problems easier and are less prone to Alzheimers. Yet one of the world's 7,000 languages goes extinct every 9 days.

We nourish our Paleolithic bodies with modern foods and reduced exercise. During famines, salt retaining and fat storing genes helped survival; now they lead to obesity and diabetes.

Two of Diamond's previous books, *Guns, Germs and Steel* and *Collapse*, were ground-breaking, important books. For me, this one, by comparison, is not.

What's to be learned from it then? Probably not much that some modern visionary hasn't already proposed. So read the book as a lively account of our ancestors until yesterday, and take what you will.