Human Ethology Bulletin 29 (2014)3: 27-29
Book Review

HISTORICAL ETHOLOGY, OR CAN WE LEARN FROM NON-WEIRD SOCIETIES

William C. McGrew
Div. of Biological Anthropology, Dept. of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Fitzwilliam St., Cambridge CB4 3DA, United Kingdom.
wcm21@cam.ac.uk

A Review of the Book

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

by Jared Diamond. 2012.
Penguin, New York. 499 pages.
ISBN 13: 978-0-14-312440-5 (Paperback, $18.00).

Jared Diamond (1937-) is not a human ethologist, but he might as well be. That is, much of what he writes, in this and earlier books, is directly relevant to the broader scope of the biology of human behaviour. More precisely, he is an astute polymath, practiced at drawing together a wide range of sources, to produce an engaging and often provocative synthesis that is accessible to enquiring lay-readers. Accordingly, we highlight his books in the reading list sent out to secondary school students who are coming up to read Human, Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge.

His Pulitzer Prize-winning tour de force was *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997), which dealt with human global dispersal and its consequences, from colonialism to zoonoses. Its follow-up was *Collapse* (2005), an account of human environmental hubris, that is, colonisations or enterprises that led to catastrophic ecological breakdowns, either past (Easter Island, Norse in Greenland) or future (Australia). These were preceded by equally powerful books, *Why Is Sex Fun?* (1997) and *The Third Chimpanzee* (1991), both of which were years ahead of their time in spotting topical issues; many of his points in the latter have proved to be pertinent, in primatology and palaeoanthropology.

His latest book is a bit different, as in addition to the usual broad intellectual brush-strokes, there is a strong autobiographical component. The academic content is leavened

by personal anecdotes, mostly from field work, and always reflective of his lifelong attraction to New Guinea. First as a birder, but then as a latter-day naturalist (in the sense of seeing humans in their niche in the natural world, along with all the other organisms), he has been venturing to the highlands of that island for 50 years. The stories are illustrative and illuminating, but also entertaining. Especially gripping are accounts of a boating accident at sea and of risky territorial incursion in the mountains.

The subtitle indicates the book's aims: He uses ethnography from 39 traditional societies, mostly foragers, pastoralists, or horticulturalists, to contrast them with the so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, see http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~henrich/dfs/WeirdPeople.pdf) societies. (Never mind that this acronym sometimes fails in its simplistic binary distinctions, e.g. Japan.) Ten of the 39 are from New Guinea (an acknowledged bias), but many of the others are familiar, such as !Kung, Yanomami, Hadza, Ache. Some of the choices are more pointed that he could have imagined when he wrote the book, such as the near-civil war in South Sudan between the Dinka and the Nuer, now raging as I write this review.

The general theme is that WEIRD societies could learn much from attending to the disappearing customs of much older, traditional societies, even in this cyber-age. That is, most of what we take for granted as human is an evolutionary veneer, dating to 11,000 years B.P. at most, since the origins of agriculture. More to the point, most of what we experience day-to-day in WEIRD societies is even more recent, since the emergence of state societies and industrialisation. Diamond thinks that much has been lost in the process. He tackles this conundrum in terms of selected topics: languages and multi-lingualism, warfare and conflict resolution, religion, child-rearing, hazards, health, and (tellingly?) treatment of the elderly. He freely admits that he has omitted many other topics of equal significance (art, kinship, cognition, gender, marriage, etc.) but pleads that a comprehensive treatment would take thousands of pages and be too unwieldy to read.

Similarly, there is no room in a short review to give examples from all the topics, but here are a few: 'Constructive paranoia' makes sense. Getting rid of old persons takes five main forms. The supernatural is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for religion. Children should be raised bilingually. Traditional warfare does more damage than modern state warfare. Diamond is always good for a striking quote, "Modern human mothers have acquired the suckling habits of rabbits, while retaining the lactational physiology of chimpanzees and monkeys." (p. 183). He takes a real incident, for example, the death of a child hit by a car, and uses it to invoke the evolutionary basis of of justice. Finally, to return to the beginning, he is an acute observer of humans behaving in the real world, devoting a whole chapter to the unfolding of the Dani War.

You might think that learning from traditional cultures is a well-worn theme, with echoes of Mel Konner, Sarah Hrdy, even Margaret Mead, but Diamond is bolstered by up-to-date findings from evolutionary anthropology and psychology, as well as from physiology (his actual academic field). He has no apparent theoretical axe to grind and is intellectually generous. Of course, specialists will find bones to pick with details (e.g. I do not think that he always gets it right when he discusses chimpanzees), but these are trivial by comparison with the overarching product of his labours.

For the record, the book has 28 colour and 19 black and white plates, plus useful tables. There are no citations in the text, but the exhaustive index is 15 pp. Unfortunately, there is no bibliography, so that tracking down a specific reference is usually impossible, but there are 11 pages of annotated further readings, at least of books.

All in all, Diamond has done it again. If you are a fan, then you will not be disappointed. If his writing is unknown to you, then here is an apt introduction to him. His inclusive approach produces the best case for integrative anthropology (that is, linking the four sub-fields of archaeological, biological, cultural, and linguistic) that I know of, even if he is not an anthropologist!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

W.C. McGrew is Emeritus Professor of Evolutionary Primatology at the University of Cambridge. He has done ethology of human or non-human primates for almost 45 years. Articles published or in press in the last 12 months have been on insectivory, faecal dietary analysis, monkey lithics, handedness, elementary technology, and chimpanzees and crocodiles.