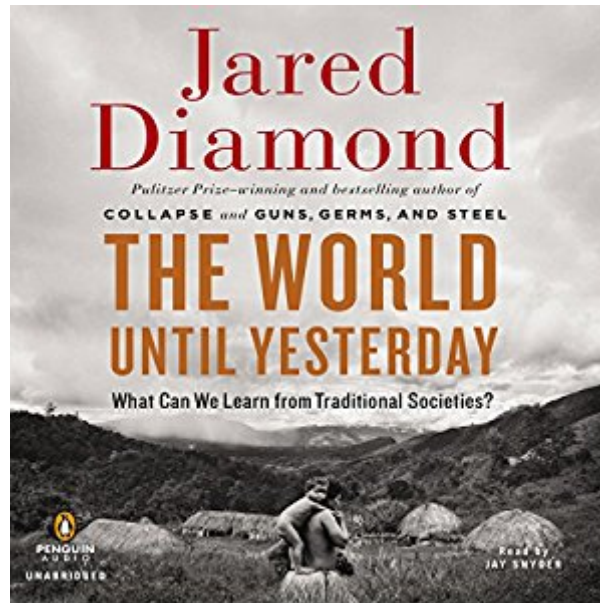


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# The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

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.

\*A full summary of this book is available here: [An Executive Summary of Jared Diamond's 'The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies'](#) The main argument: The onset of agriculture and farming some 11,000 years ago (termed the Neolithic Revolution), is arguably the most significant turning point in the history of our species. Agriculture induced a major population explosion, which then led to urbanization; labor specialization; social stratification; and formalized governance--thus ultimately bringing us to civilization as we know it today. Prior to the Neolithic Revolution--and extending back time out of mind--human beings lived in a far different way. Specifically, our ancestors lived in small, largely egalitarian tribes of no more than 50 to 100 individuals, and hunted and foraged for their food. The transition from our traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle, to early farming (and herding), to civilization as we know it now (which, on an evolutionary time-scale, occurred but yesterday) has certainly brought with it some very impressive benefits. Indeed, many of us today enjoy comforts and opportunities the likes of which our more traditional ancestors would never have dreamed of. However, it cannot be said that the transition from traditional to modern has left us without any difficulties. Indeed, some would go so far as to say that the problems that civilization has introduced outweigh the benefits that it has brought; and even the most unromantic among us are likely to agree that our experiment in civilization has not been an

unmitigated success.

Like "Edward Hopper in Vermont" reviewed earlier, Jared Diamond's new book, *The World Until Yesterday*, is also endowed with a series of gorgeous photographs that depict the author's themes and preoccupations. At least one of them - a photograph explaining why contemporary Westerners gravitate toward obesity while traditional societies have mostly slender inhabitants - is likely to give readers a belly aching laugh. There is a deeper lesson from this one picture, it's clear the author's aim is to create a readable document, not one that is so clogged with statistics that it becomes impenetrable. Professor Diamond's main argument is that traditional societies and "advanced" Western ones learn from each other, absorb and assimilate the customs and cultures of each other in a way that will better serve their interests. That's why, he notes, urban American gangs don't resolve all their disputes in courts, but instead rely on traditional methods of crisis resolution with negotiation, intimidation, and war. It's also the reason members of traditional societies like the ones he observed in New Guinea now have learned to travel broadly, use computers, and wear variations of Western clothing. The tone of the book is understated rather than preachy, and delivered in a relaxed conversational style. The author likes to let one thing stand for the whole, as when he writes that Harvard University lost a great deal of its endowment funds during the recent financial debacle. It is well documented that many of Harvard's peer group did as well. Stanford, Notre Dame, Cornell, Princeton and many other elite institutions lost from 25 to 30 percent of their endowment funds, but rather than pound us with the details, the author elegantly lets one example stand for the whole.

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