



Villagers in Blanche Bay, New Guinea, in the 1890s.

ANTHROPOLOGY

# Power of the past

**Monique Borgerhoff Mulder** assesses an exploration of how modern industrial and traditional societies differ.

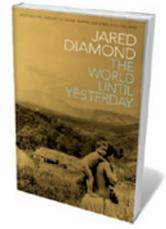
When outsiders come into a discipline and publish a popular book that becomes a classic, insiders may not be pleased. Typically, there is territoriality (those ideas aren't yours); pedantry (so much inaccuracy); and jealousy (I should have done it myself).

Jared Diamond — once ecologist, now ornithologist and geographer by trade — has ventured into anthropology twice before. In *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Norton, 1997) he offered distinct and powerful hypotheses for why different parts of the globe developed at such different rates, attracting a wide readership to big questions in anthropology that few had dared to tackle. In *Collapse* (Viking, 2005), he provided a loosely synthesized catalogue of the factors associated with the downfall of civilizations. Now we have *The World Until Yesterday*, offering the personal reflections of a Westerner who has visited communities still peripheral to the globalized world — thoughts that anthropologists rarely divulge.

Diamond uses his 50-odd years' worth of visits to remote New Guinea in the pursuit of birding fieldwork to meditate, as the prologue details, on "how all of our ancestors lived for tens of thousands of years, until virtually yesterday". He aims to identify what we can learn from the foraging and simple farming societies that preceded modern (and indeed ancient) states. In chapters on warfare, child rearing, the care of the elderly and health, we are treated to engaging stories from New Guinea and samplings from ethnographic texts on other traditional populations. The result — which reads in some places like a cultural-anthropology textbook from the 1970s, in others like a mesmerizing thriller — reveals a world in which some people strangle their elders rather than book them into retirement homes, and resolve conflicts with strangers over a ceremonial feast rather than an affidavit.

➔ [NATURE.COM](http://NATURE.COM)  
For a review of Jared Diamond's *Collapse*, see: [go.nature.com/8ug879](http://go.nature.com/8ug879)

Diamond's central objective is to determine whether 'we' or 'they' do it better, be it in conflict resolution, child rearing or how we eat. He looks for what we can learn from them: co-sleeping with infants, multilingualism, restorative justice and enriched lives for the elderly, with no retirement age, are some highlights.



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

JARED DIAMOND  
Viking; 2012. 512 pp.  
\$36

Many anthropologists will undoubtedly object to this us-versus-them framing, although for a popular readership it is clearly thought-provoking. Human diversity in social organization cannot be dichotomized as traditional versus modern. Diamond recognizes this in his preface, but thereafter chooses to ignore it. Instead, he compares foraging and hoe-cultivating societies in Africa, South America and New Guinea with communities typical of modern industrial states, primarily the United States. However, he does not address the intriguing question of how power, status and resources are distributed among individuals across the diverse kinds of societies that have existed in human history, or the implications of these distributions for human welfare.

Later chapters on danger, language, religion and health revert more to the style of argument Diamond used in *Guns, Germs and Steel*, with appeals to evolutionary and ecological explanations.

Apropos of danger, Diamond tells a ripping yarn of his canoe-wreck at dusk in the Indonesian archipelago. This ordeal suggested to him the concept of "constructive paranoia", an alertness to risk that he believes might be adaptive for traditional peoples living in dangerous environments. With regard to language, he follows others in noting that linguistic diversity maps onto high net primary productivity, low seasonality and low human-population mobility — in other words, languages diversify where there is plentiful food available all year and human settlements are not forced to move. And, in the theme of earlier chapters, he promotes language diversity as something to strive for, citing the cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism.

Evolution by natural selection appears only late in the book, in a well-balanced discussion of the multiple functions of religion and how these change in importance over time. Supernatural explanations for unforeseen events have declined as scientific thought gained ascendancy, whereas the provision of comfort, hope and meaning has become more prominent over time ▶

▶ as inequalities among citizens have escalated. Again, the material draws on the work of other scholars, but Diamond suggests, interestingly, that US citizens may be more religious than those of other industrialized nations because of the high levels of economic inequality in their country (religion helps to rationalize prosperity for those at the top of the ladder and mitigate adversity for those at the bottom).

Finally, in a chapter on health, Diamond recapitulates arguments for the 'diseases of civilization' — that the fats and salts we consume do not suit physiologies designed for foraging, and cause the hypertension and diabetes crises that we see in populations transitioning to modern lifestyles. With reference to James Neel's 'thrifty gene' hypothesis, Diamond attributes the particularly high incidence of type 2 diabetes among Pima Native Americans and Nauruan Pacific Islanders to catastrophic recent famines in these populations, which may have favoured the survival of individuals who most efficiently converted sugars to fats. He also proposes that Europeans may have been through a gradual and largely undetectable diabetes crisis, starting in the fifteenth century, as food security increased with the development of state distribution systems — with Johann Sebastian Bach named as one possible victim.

Diamond has an engaging style, and has packed the book with grisly anecdotes and delightful detail from the jungles of New Guinea to the strip malls of Los Angeles, California, alerting us to grim realities of the industrial world. For example, a single pan-fried-noodle combo dish served in Los Angeles contains more than a year's worth of a Yanomami Indian's salt intake. The book brings anthropology alive for those who have never had the privilege of visiting, or reading deeply about, societies very different from their own. For those who have worked in the remote reaches of the world, it may tire or even annoy. Tire, because the book is long, and draws on overly familiar ethnographies; annoy, because the scale of comparison, us versus them, is conceptually limiting.

Diamond has previously described his writings on the cultures of New Guinea as journalism. Perhaps this is how we should read *The World Until Yesterday*, as a highly personal reflection on the virtues and vices of modern industrial civilization. ■

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One of the vessels captured by US explorer Richard Byrd in Antarctica in the 1930s.

#### HISTORY

## Frozen assets

**Edmund Stump** welcomes a history of Antarctica that covers the glory, the rivalries and the scientific legacy.

From James Cook's circumnavigation of Terra Australis Incognita in 1772–75 to today's shifting international population of researchers, Antarctica's history is stamped by the continent's remote isolation, extreme climate and scientific importance. Its strategic and economic potential have not escaped government attention. Behind the scenes, nations have long plotted to win sovereignty and control resources. And that is where David Day's *Antarctica: A Biography* takes us, into a two-faced world of public and covert intentions where personal and national rivalries abound.

*Antarctica* is the first comprehensive history of the continent, spanning the centuries since Cook's voyage. The heroic expeditions of Robert Falcon Scott, Roald Amundsen and other luminaries are all there, as are many that are less well known. Day couches these throughout in political contexts — how they served the motives of the colonial offices or state departments back home. The dramas, played out in secret memos and in published statements in newspapers, give the book a slow, even glacial, pace at times.

At every turn there is hesitancy on the part of diplomats and leaders: to claim or not to claim, to recognize others' claims or not, to offend trading partners or not, to respond to official memos or to let them go unanswered. In this way we have collectively backed into today's Antarctica, where all territorial claims are held in abeyance, a 50-year moratorium prohibits exploration for mineral and energy resources, and tourists flock in droves.

Day has done a remarkable job of collating information from rich and varied international sources.

**Antarctica: A Biography**  
DAVID DAY  
Oxford Univ. Press:  
2013. 624 pp. £25

He draws from original accounts, newspaper articles, the recently released papers of US naval officer and polar explorer Richard Byrd, and numerous national archives with their copious committee reports and memos, some recently declassified.

The concealment of who made what claims where and when, and how different versions were presented to the public, dominate the book. One example is what Byrd told reporters in Dunedin, New Zealand, after his first Antarctic expedition (1928–30). Although he said he was "not the least concerned with claiming the land for America", he had recently photographed miles of mountains and coastline in Marie Byrd Land with just that intent. He had also instructed Laurence Gould, his second in command, to leave a note in a cairn claiming the territory for the United States when Gould's ground party traversed beyond the boundary of New Zealand's Ross Dependency.

Although I am familiar with the history of exploration in the Peninsula and Ross Sea sectors of Antarctica, Day expanded my horizons to the 'African' sector, the section of East Antarctica facing the tip of Africa. Here, between the world wars, Norwegians led the last great slaughter of Antarctic whales and mapped major sectors of the coastline, infringing on claims by the ever-vigilant