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A Question of Blame When Societies Fall



The ancient Moai on Easter Island.

Tomas Munita for The New York Times

By GEORGE JOHNSON
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As I pulled out of Tucson listening to an audiobook of Jared Diamond's "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed," the first of a procession of blue-and-yellow billboards pointed the way to Arizona's strangest roadside attraction, "The Thing?"

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Peter Andrews/Reuters
Hutu refugees in 1996 on their way back to Rwanda from Zaire.

The come-ons were slicker and brighter than those I remembered from childhood trips out West. But the destination was the same: a curio store and gas station just off the highway at a remote whistle stop called Dragoon, Ariz.

Dragoon is also home to an archaeological research center, the Amerind Foundation, where a group of archaeologists, cultural anthropologists and historians converged in the fall for a seminar, "Choices and Fates of Human Societies."

What the scientists held in common was a suspicion that in writing his two best-selling sagas of civilization — the other is "Guns, Germs and Steel" — Dr. Diamond washed over the details that make cultures unique to assemble a grand unified theory of history.

"A big-picture man," one participant called him. For anthropologists, who spend their lives reveling in minutiae — the specifics and contradictions of human

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Jared Diamond says a factor in the 1994 Rwanda genocide was that the country had let its population outstrip its food supply.

culture — the words are not necessarily a compliment.

“Everybody knows that the beauty of Diamond is that it’s simple,” said Patricia A. McAnany, an archaeologist at [Boston University](#), who organized the meeting with her colleague Norman Yoffee of the [University of Michigan](#). “It’s accessible intellectually without having to really turn the wattage up too much.”

Dr. Diamond’s many admirers would disagree. “Guns, Germs and Steel” won a Pulitzer Prize, and Dr. Diamond, a professor of geography at the University of California, Los Angeles, has received, among many honors, a National Medal of Science. It is his ability as a synthesizer and storyteller that makes his work so

compelling.

For an hour I had listened as he, or rather his narrator, described how the inhabitants of Easter Island had precipitated their own demise by cutting down all the palm trees — for, among other purposes, transporting those giant statues — and how the Anasazi of Chaco Canyon and the Maya might have committed similar “ecocide.”

By the time I approached the turnoff for Amerind’s boulder-strewn campus, Dr. Diamond had moved on to the Vikings’ fate. But for the moment my mind was in the grip of “The Thing.”

Detouring past the conference center, I parked in front of the old tourist trap, paid the \$1 admission and followed a path of stenciled yellow footprints to a building out back. Inside a cinder-block coffin lay the subject of my quest, what appeared to be the mummified remains of a woman holding a mummified child.

“The Thing” looked human, or maybe like pieces of human dolled up with papier-mâché. Either way, it seemed like a fitting symbol for the complaints I’d been hearing about Dr. Diamond: that through the wide-angle lenses of his books, people appear not as thinking agents motivated by dreams and desires, ideas and ideologies, but as pawns of their environment. As things.

The backlash had been brewing since a symposium last year, “Exploring Scholarly and Best-Selling Accounts of Social Collapse and Colonial Encounters,” at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, Calif. Although “Guns, Germs and Steel” has been celebrated as an antidote to racism — Western civilization prevails not because of inherent superiority, but geographical luck — some anthropologists saw it as excusing the excesses of the conquerors. If it wasn’t their genes that made them do it, it was their geography.

“Diamond in effect argues that no one is to blame,” said Deborah B. Gewertz, an anthropologist at Amherst College. “The haves are not to be blamed for the condition of the have-nots.”

Dr. Diamond anticipated this kind of reaction. In the epilogue to “Guns, Germs and Steel,” he acknowledged that human will was an important pivot in the turning of history, as were freak accidents and chaotic “butterfly effects,” in which tiny perturbations are amplified into cataclysms. But the accidents of geography — the availability of raw materials and crops, a hospitable climate, accessible trade routes and even the cartographical shapes of continents — step forth as prime movers.

While “Guns, Germs, and Steel” explored the factors contributing to a society’s rise, “Collapse” tried to account for the downfalls. Here, human agency played a more prominent role. In case after case, Dr. Diamond described how a confluence of

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factors — fragile ecosystems, climatic change, hostile neighbors and, ultimately, bad decision making — cornered a society into inadvertently damaging or even destroying itself.

In his haunting chapter about Easter Island, he weighed the data — radiocarbon dating, charcoal and pollen analysis and botanical and archaeological surveys — and concluded that the inhabitants had mined the forests to extinction, setting off a cataclysm. What, Dr. Diamond wondered in an often cited passage, was going through the mind of the Easter Islander who cut the last tree?

But what was intended as a cautionary tale was taken by some readers as blaming the victims. Terry Hunt, an archaeologist at the [University of Hawaii](#), came to the Amerind conference with a different story. Deforestation, he said, was caused not by people, but by predatory Polynesian rats, with the human population remaining stable until the introduction of European diseases.

Dr. Diamond, he said, “shifts all of the burden to people and their stupidity rather than to a complex ecosystem where these things interact.”

Taken together, the two books struck Frederick K. Errington, an anthropologist at Trinity College in Hartford, as a “one-two punch.” The haves prosper because of happenstance beyond their control, while the have-nots are responsible for their own demise.

Dr. Errington and Dr. Gewertz, who are husband and wife, work in Papua New Guinea, a treasure trove of ethnic groups speaking more than 700 languages. Dr. Diamond has also spent time on the island, where he first went to study birds.

Dr. Gewertz still bristles as she recalls picking up “Guns, Germs, and Steel” and seeing that it had been framed around what was called “Yali’s question.”

Yali was a political leader and a member of a “cargo cult” that sprung up after World War II. By building ritualistic landing strips and control towers and wearing hand-carved wooden headsets, islanders hoped to summon the return of the packaged food, weapons, medicine, clothing and other gifts from the heavens that had been airdropped to troops fighting Japan.

One day Yali asked Dr. Diamond, “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?”

Thus began Dr. Diamond’s tale about the combination of geographical factors that led to Europeans’ colonizing Papua New Guinea rather than Papua New Guineans’ colonizing Europe.

“We think he gets Yali’s question wrong,” Dr. Gewertz said. “Yali was not asking about nifty Western stuff.”

With more of the cargo their European visitors so clearly coveted, the islanders would have been able to trade with them as equals. Instead, they were subjugated.

What Yali was really asking, she suggested, was why Europeans had never treated them like fellow human beings. The responsibility and struggle of anthropology, Dr. Gewertz said, is to see the world through others’ eyes.

In “Collapse,” Dr. Diamond proposed that a precipitating factor in the Rwanda genocide of 1994, in which hundreds of thousands of Tutsis were slaughtered by Hutu compatriots, was Malthusian. The country had let its population outstrip its food supply.

Christopher C. Taylor, an anthropologist at the [University of Alabama at Birmingham](#), saw the tragedy through the other end of the telescope. One afternoon, he sat in the living room of Amerind’s old mission-style lodge, which looks out onto the desolate beauty of the Little Dragoon mountains, calmly

describing how he and his Tutsi fiancée had fled Rwanda just as the massacres began. Safely back in the United States, he studied the country's popular political cartoons, sensing that for many Rwandans, politics was tangled in a web of legends involving sacred kingship and fertility rites. The king, and by implication the president, was the conduit for *imaana*, a spiritual current symbolized by liquids like rain, rivers, milk, honey, semen and blood.

In times of droughts, floods, crop failures, infant mortality or other misfortunes, he might have to be sacrificed to spill his *imaana* back into the soil.

"In order to understand the motives of the Rwandans, you have to understand the local symbolism and the local cosmology," Dr. Taylor said. "Because, after all, what Diamond is doing is imposing his own cosmology, his own symbolic system."

By the time I left Amerind, I realized that what I had witnessed was a clash of world views. Central to the "cosmology" of Dr. Diamond's tribe is a principle celebrated throughout the physical and biological sciences — to understand is to simplify and seek patterns.

In an e-mail message, he said that progress in any field depends on syntheses and individual studies. "In both chemistry and physics, the need for both approaches has been recognized for a long time," he wrote. "One no longer finds specialists on molybdenum decrying the periodic table's sweeping superficiality, nor advocates of the periodic table scorning mere descriptive studies of individual elements."

For the anthropologists, the exceptions were more important than the rules. Instead of seeking overarching laws, the call was to "contextualize," "complexify," "relativize," "particularize" and even "problematize," a word that in their dialect was given an oddly positive spin. At some moments, the seminar seemed less like a scientific meeting than a session of the Modern Language Association.

But the anthropologists had a point. As Einstein put it, explanations should be as simple as possible — but no simpler. Is it realistic to hope, as Dr. Diamond did at the end of "Guns, Germs and Steel," that "historical studies of human societies can be pursued as scientifically as studies of dinosaurs"?

One afternoon I drove out to Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, about 130 miles northwest of Dragoon. Turning off North Arizona Boulevard near a Blockbuster Video store and KFC/Taco Bell, I saw the Great House, four stories high, loom into view. Abandoned over half a millennium ago by the Hohokam people, the earthen ruins have been incongruously protected from the elements by a steel roof on stilts designed in 1928 by [Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.](#)

One suspects that the Hohokam were content to let the place melt. Depending on which [eyeglasses](#) you are wearing, Casa Grande is a story of environmental collapse or of adaptation and resilience. When conditions no longer favored centralization the people moved on, re-emerging as the O'odham tribes and a thriving casino industry.

Abandonment as a strategy. Driving back on Interstate 10, past an umbilical cord of eastbound railroad container cars owned by Hanjin Shipping and the latest crests of urban sprawl, I tried to imagine the good people of Tucson or Phoenix bowing out with such grace.

At the seminar, Dr. McAnany suggested that the very idea of societal collapse might be in the eye of the beholder. She was thinking of the Maya, whose stone ruins have become the Yucatan's roadside attractions. But the descendants of the Maya live on. She recalled a field trip by local children to a site she was excavating in Belize: "This little girl looks up at me, and she has this beautiful little Maya face, and asks, 'What happened to all the Maya? Why did they all die out?'"

No one visits Stonehenge, she noted, and asks whatever happened to the English.

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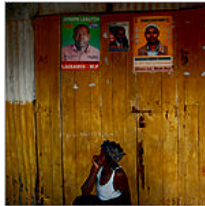
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