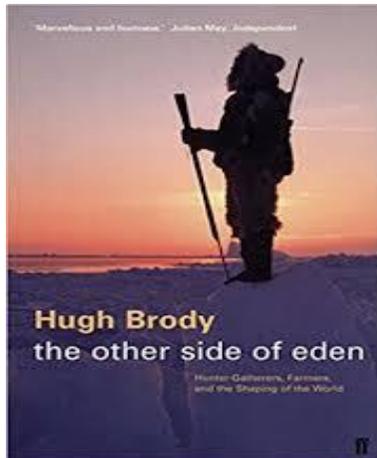


Dialogue

Hunters, Farmers and the Shaping of the World



June 17
Hi Ron,

Have you ever read any of Hugh Brody's books? I was recently loaned one of his books by a young neighbor who read it for a class some years ago -- and am now in the second phase of re-reading it. It's called "*The Other Side of Eden; hunters, farmers, and the shaping of the world.*" It was published in 2000, based mostly on research done in the 70's and 80's. He's an anthropologist and documentarian. And the book -- to my limited mind -- is not only interesting, but also paradigm shifting. In a sense it's a prequel to Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel", though he references that work.

Hugh's fieldwork was done with Inuit and sub-Arctic Indians, and he has become an advocate for the few remaining hunter-gatherer peoples around the world. So his work gives us a bit of a picture of who we are/human nature that's different from that of Diamond, who's looking at the rise and spread of agriculture, etc. In fact, while Diamond -- along with Wendell Berry (whom I also greatly admire) -- would probably divide the world between agriculturalists

(Berry would say "agrarians") and urbanites, Brody divides the world between hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists, meaning all the rest of us who rely on agriculture for sustenance. And I think he makes a convincing case for the different mindset that each side of that divide entails.



Brody, being a well-Hebrew-schooled British Jew, is very familiar with the Genesis origin myths. But, in addition to noting that they have, through artwork, movies, music, etc., become somewhat of a universal origin myth, Brody argues that they are the mythology of agriculturalists. Hunter-gatherers, he asserts -- convincingly, I think -- until they are dispossessed, feel that they are IN Eden... even if it's the arctic or the Kalahari, etc., not expelled from it.

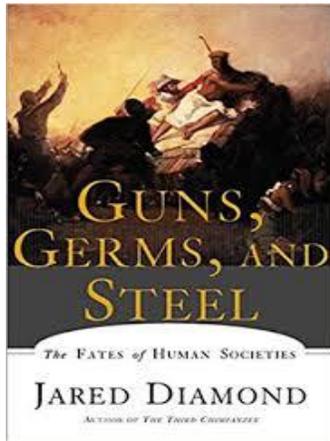
Anyway, I'm hoping that you've read some of Brody's writings. I'm dying to talk about this with someone... but even the friend who loaned me this book didn't really "get it"... since it was assigned reading.

Take care,
Jon M.

June 18
Jon,

I'm sorry to say that I have not read Brody. However, I have read four of Jared Diamond's books, not only Guns, Germs, and Steel, and Collapse, but also two others, The Third Chimpanzee and The World Until Yesterday. If I remember correctly, The World Until Yesterday, which came out in 2012 (I believe), is basically a prequel

to *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. It, too, is a picture of hunter-gatherer societies, based largely on Diamond's research and stays in Papua New Guinea. From what you are telling me about Brody, it looks like Diamond presents a far less positive view of hunter-gatherer societies than Brody does, pointing out that while such societies were based on cooperation within family and tribal groups, they also tended to involve lethal warfare between such groups, so much so that a much larger percentage of the members of those societies died in warfare than do members of modern societies, even in the very lethal 20th century. At the moment, I must admit that I



believe that what Diamond is saying is true and that I am generally skeptical of views that idealize "primitive communism," including, of course, those of Marx and Engels. I am certainly open to believing that hunter-gatherer peoples had more reverential views of the Earth than did later peoples, but I doubt that they had an idyllic view of those other hunter-gatherer groups with whom they competed for scarce resources. (Forgive me if I am misrepresenting Brody's views.)

Ron

June 18

Hi Ron,

Thanks for the note. I have read two of the three other Diamond books that you mentioned (haven't read *The Third Chimpanzee* -- actually, wasn't even aware of it. So that's something to look forward to!). So, yes, I am familiar with the apparently eternal

warfare that existed among the people that he spent time with in Papua New Guinea. And, yes, it is possible that Brody -- in spite of many years of living with the Inuit and Sub-Arctic tribes -- is guilty of romanticizing hunter-gatherer societies. In his defense, however, I'll say that he makes no bones about that the fact that, in his experience, they were not pacifists.



But now I will have to look back at *The World Until Yesterday* because, as I remembered it, those tribal peoples were, in fact, agriculturalists. If my recollection is correct then it is not, in fact, a prequel to GGS, as I think Brody's is -- and as Diamond poses it. And it seemed to me that the continual warfare that Diamond witnessed was in large part a function of the high density of the population there -- a density that could only be achieved by an agricultural society. But perhaps I am mis-remembering Diamond's report.

But further, since each of the Diamond books that I have read clearly has a message (GGS: why westerners have more "cargo"; *Collapse*: his call for environmental responsibility), the message that I thought was his goal in *The World Until Yesterday* was the necessary role of the state in limiting tribal warfare. What was your takeaway?

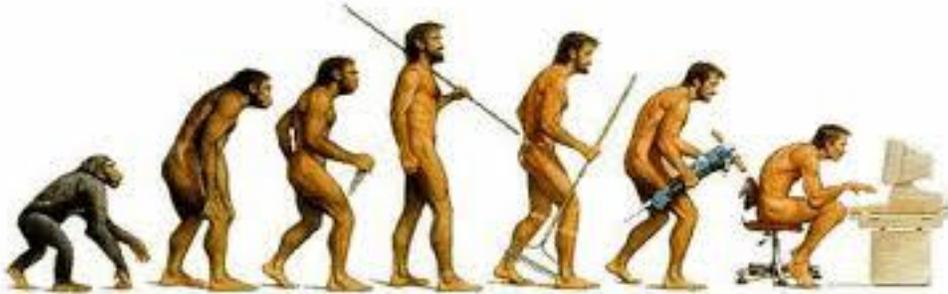
Anyway, thanks for the note... and for the cautionary warnings about romanticizing primitive communism.

Take care,
Jon

June 19
Jon,

I think you are right about Diamond. The societies in Papua New Guinea were agriculturists. However, he also discusses hunter-gatherer societies elsewhere, e.g., in either the Namib or Kalahari deserts in Africa (I don't quite remember), and my impression is that, here, too, there was inter-tribal warfare, although I believe he mentions that, (ironically) where resources were scarce, there tended to be somewhat more cooperation among the different groups.

I also agree that Diamond seems to be arguing, in *The World Until Yesterday*, that the state (or civilization) was a step forward because it limited inter-tribal warfare, that is, enabled cooperation among broader, non-tribal/family groups. In other words, Diamond is a statist liberal.



My basic point on this stuff is to argue against the notion that human nature, as it has biologically and historically evolved, by itself provides the basis for species-wide cooperation. The way we are now and, I believe, always have been, people cooperate within groups but compete with and struggle for dominance over outside groups. Where population is small and resources reasonably available, as in some hunter-gatherer societies, the groups can arrange to keep away from each other and, hence, seem not to compete. But that does not provide the basis for true, species-wide cooperation, especially where population is dense. This, I believe, will require a leap, a conscious choice/evolution on the part of the vast majority of people, to a higher/broader level of solidarity (across groups, classes, genders, nations, etc.), and cooperation.

I also think that the various forms of tribal societies maintained equality by suppressing or at least greatly limiting individual initiative via the enforcement of cultural norms (the tribal traditions, what the ancestors taught). In other words, to a considerable degree, equality was coerced via the invocation of authority, in this case, the long-standing traditions of the different groups.

Ron

June 21

Hi Ron,

Thanks -- again -- for the response. Yup, I agree that Diamond is a statist liberal. And, yup, I also agree that we are a tribal species (how could we be otherwise, since it's been adaptive for so long?! By the way, did you see the NYT article a few months ago about humpback whales? Said that whales from the Indian Ocean speak a different dialect from those in the Caribbean and that if they were to be mixed... they would fight). So, indeed, I appreciate and agree with your point in paragraph 3 above that species-wide cooperation (or can we hope for something broader?) will require a conscious decision by the vast majority of humans. Paragraph 4 point may also be true, but I suspect that in truly hunter-gatherer groups the honoring of tradition, elders, ancestors, shamans, etc., is not so much coerced as generally accepted, and useful.

What impressed me about the Brody book was not some new age idealization of hunter-gatherer society but 1) his discussion of the spread of agriculture likely being to a large extent a violent suppression and dispossession of the hunter-gatherer people in its path (the experience in the US and South Africa being recent examples), 2) the discussion of the wide spread of the Indo-European language group representing, in all likelihood, the overwhelming of h-g groups by agriculturalists, 3) the voluminous knowledge of their home territory necessary for members of societies that live -- day to day -- by hunting and gathering without making plans for the future, 4) the important role of dreams in h-g society for the integration of knowledge of the environment with intuition, etc., primarily about the movement of the animals to be hunted, (though, granted, this just speaks to the hunters, not the gatherers), 4) the role of shamans in further exploring the threads of intuition in crossing the boundaries with other species and with

the spirits of the land, 5) the intense intimacy between h-g peoples and the lands that they inhabit (not "ownership" of the land. More being owned by/a part of a land), and etc.

That kind of awareness of, and belonging to, the land we inhabit, or something approaching it is, it seems to me, much needed... and totally lost to a people fixated on human-created stimulation. All the people walking around with their ear-buds in and their smart phones ahead will, I'm afraid, have no awareness of, nor reason to want to protect, the beautiful world through which they jog, or walk to school, or -- spandex-clad -- stretch their muscles on bicycles, etc., etc.



Or, to your point, give thought to the "species-wide cooperation" for which you speak, much less a "cross-species cooperation" to survive and flourish.

Thanks again,
Jon

June 27
Jon,

I'm sorry to have taken so long to reply to your last email.

I agree that we (modern humans) have much to learn from hunter-gatherer societies, that we should work to protect those that still exist and approach with open minds and open arms what they have to teach us, particularly their (analytic and intuitive) conceptions of

the interrelation of all species within a given environment. I also agree that what we need is not just "species-wide" cooperation but "cross-species" cooperation, and I hope that these two notions might become mutually reinforcing over time.

Although I am not optimistic about a lot of things, I think you are overly negative about where a lot of "plugged-in" people are at on some crucial issues. I think your wording "All the people walking around...will...have no awareness of, nor reason to protect, the beautiful world through which they jog, or walk to school," etc., is at least somewhat overdrawn. While these people may not have the awareness of, and the love of and care for, our world that you do, many of them do share a piece of that awareness, love, and care. I certainly share your frustration with, and even disdain for, the people walking around with their noses in their phones, etc., but I am also impressed with the number of people who walk around Griffith Park, one of the largest and most natural parks in an urban setting in the world, on a given weekend (so much so that I try to avoid the park on those days), and not all of them are just there to look at or hike to the Hollywood sign. It may be limited, but many people do have some feeling for the natural world, and at least some of that is behind the significant majorities who poll as being concerned about global warming and the other damage we are doing to the natural world. Speaking personally, I continue to watch as many wildlife documentaries as I can, and the fact that they get funded, made, aired (and, I assume, watched), is also something I find at least somewhat heartening. (By the way, I don't have a cell phone, let alone ear buds, despite aggressive prodding from a couple of my friends.)

Thanks for sharing your thoughts on the Brody book with me. I am currently reading Soren Kierkegaard's, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing" (the good). I find it very moving.

Ron
