

books

Jared Diamond in row over claim tribal peoples live in 'state of constant war'

Respected author's book condemned by Survival International as 'completely wrong, both factually and morally'

Edward Helmore in New York
The Observer, Saturday 2 February 2013



Jared Diamond photographed at home in Los Angeles with some Guinean artefacts. Photograph: Steve Schofield for the Observer

A fierce dispute has erupted between Pulitzer prize-winning author Jared Diamond and campaign group Survival International over Diamond's recently published and highly acclaimed comparison of western and tribal societies, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*

The controversy threatens to expose a deep rift in modern anthropology, with each claiming the other has fallen into a delusion that threatens to undermine the chances for survival of the world's remaining tribal societies.

On a book tour of the UK last week, Diamond, 75, was drawn into a dispute with the campaign group after its director, Stephen Corry, condemned Diamond's book as "completely wrong – both factually and morally – and extremely dangerous" for portraying tribal societies as more violent than western ones.

Survival accuses Diamond of applying studies of 39 societies, of which 10 are in his realm of direct experience in New Guinea and neighbouring islands, to advance a thesis that tribal peoples across the world live in a state of near-constant warfare.

"It's a profoundly damaging argument that tribal peoples are more violent than us," said Survival's Jonathan Mazower. "It simply isn't true. If allowed to go unchallenged ... it would do tremendous damage to the movement for tribal people's rights. Diamond has constructed his argument using a small minority of anthropologists and using statistics in a way that is misleading and manipulative."

In a lengthy and angry rebuttal on Saturday, Diamond confirmed his finding that "tribal warfare tends to be chronic, because there are not strong central governments that can enforce peace". He accused Survival of falling into the thinking that views tribal people either as "primitive brutish barbarians" or as "noble savages, peaceful paragons of virtue living in harmony with their environment, and admirable compared to us, who are the real brutes".

He added: "An occupational hazard facing authors like me, who try to steer a middle course between these two extremes, is the likelihood of being criticised from either direction."

But Survival remains adamant. "The clear thrust of his argument is that there is a natural evolutionary path along which human society progresses and we are simply further along it," said Mazower. "That's extremely dangerous, because it is the notion that they're backward and need to be 'developed'. That thinking – and not that their way of living might be just as modern as any other way of living – is the same thinking that underpins governments that persecute tribal people."

Mazower pointed to tribes in north-west Amazonia who are nomadic hunter-gatherers but live among settled peoples. "Clearly, they have had the opportunity to adopt a more settled way of life if they wanted to," he said. "They have been on an enormously complicated journey, through wildly different environments, ways of life, beliefs, languages to get to this point."

Diamond's reasoning, he said, was "pernicious" and "leads to the kind of remark the former president of Botswana made about the Kalahari bushmen: 'How can you have a hunter-gatherer living in the age of computers? If the bushman wants to survive he must change, otherwise, like the dodo, he will perish'."

However, Diamond says Survival's condemnation of his book is driven by something other than facts. He argues its protectiveness toward tribal societies has led it to deny practices including warfare, infanticide, widow-strangling and abandoning the elderly. "Well-meaning defenders of traditional peoples, including apparently Corry, feel it necessary to deny the existence of those practices," he said. "That's a very bad idea – 'extremely dangerous', to use Corry's words where they really belong.

"Mistreatment of tribal peoples should be condemned not because you claim that they are peaceful when they really are not. It should instead be condemned on moral grounds: the mistreatment of any people is wrong."

Diamond said his manuscript was reviewed by dozens of expert anthropologists without objection and named several scholars who concurred with him. "They all conclude that the percentage of a population meeting a violent death per year, averaged over a long period of alternating war and peace, is on the average considerably higher in tribal societies than in state societies."

But that is unlikely to satisfy Survival, which believes tribal societies are societies like any other with their own sets of faults and virtues and which need to be able to make their own choices without interference or encroachment on their land.

"If Diamond's book had been published in the 18th or 19th century, they would have been called 'primitive savages'," said Mazower. "He's just dressed that up with a lot of pseudo-scientific language and some unexceptional stuff about what we can learn from them."

More from the Guardian [What's this?](#)

[Daily Mail carries out yet another exercise in female humiliation](#) 31 Jan 2013

[A poisoned vagina? What an intriguing yet stupid murder weapon](#) 31 Jan 2013

[Experience: My holiday romance nearly killed me](#) 02 Feb 2013

[Hilary Mantel: 'You have to experience it to know what fat is like'](#) 02 Feb 2013

data spore by technology controversial lines
cut from Atrocities 03 Feb 2013

© 2013 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

;