

PEACE BY OTHER MEANS

Symposium on the Role of Ethnography
and the Humanities in the Understanding,
Prevention, and Resolution of Enmity
Part 1

Jeffrey M. Perl, Johan M. G. van der Dennen

Introduction: The Undivided Big Banana

The subtitle of Jared Diamond's recent study *The World until Yesterday* is interrogative: *What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* For most of its almost five hundred pages, however, the declarative form, "What We Can Learn from Traditional Societies," would better have characterized the book's genre. It comes as a surprise, therefore, that, in one area only but that one the most important, "modern state societies" are said to have nothing valuable to learn from the history of premodern or the ethnography of nonmodern societies.¹ In the grave and vital matter of preventing enmities and resolving them, pre- and nonmodern cultures are cast as inferior to our own, despite the incomparably vast numbers of both warriors and civilians who have died as a result of distinctively modern failures to prevent wars and other kinds of mass slaughter.

1. I use *ethnography* here as Tim Ingold uses the term in his Radcliffe-Brown lecture of 2007, "Anthropology Is Not Ethnography," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 154 (2008): 69–92, at 90: "Ethnographers describe, principally

in writing, how the people of some place and time perceive the world and how they act in it."

Common Knowledge 20:3

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-2732686

© 2014 by Duke University Press

412

The drift of Diamond’s argument is that, however terrible the effects of the wars between modern states, they come at last to definitive ends, whereas the “wars of small-scale societies often involve cycles of revenge killing” that end

only when one side has been exterminated or driven out, or else when both sides are exhausted. . . . It’s much harder for a tribe than for a state ([or even for] a large centralized chiefdom) to reach a decision to seek an end to fighting, and to negotiate a truce with the enemy. . . . A tribe lacks centralized leadership and everyone has his say. It’s even harder for a tribe than for a state to maintain peace, once a truce has been negotiated. . . . Tribal peaces are fragile and quickly deteriorate to yet another cycle of war.²

Yet it is not, Diamond adds, because tribal societies are in love with killing that they cannot find ways to conclude wars once they have begun: “Despite the excitement and the prestige of tribal fighting, tribespeople understand better than anyone else the misery associated with warfare” (148), hence “the surprising ease with which small numbers of Australian patrol officers and native policemen were able to end tribal warfare in the then-territory of Papua New Guinea”:

They arrived at a warring village, bought a pig, shot the pig to demonstrate the power of firearms, tore down village stockades and confiscated the war shields of all warring groups in order to make it lethally dangerous for anyone to initiate war, and occasionally shot New Guineans who dared to attack them. Of course, New Guineans are pragmatic and could recognize the power of guns. But one might not have predicted how easily they would give up warfare that they had been practicing for thousands of years, when achievement in war had been praised from childhood onwards and held up as the measure of a man. The explanation for this surprising outcome is that New Guineans appreciated the benefits of the state-guaranteed peace that they had been unable to achieve for themselves. . . . If the New Guineans had really wanted to resume fighting each other, it would have been trivially easy for them to kill the patrol officer and his policemen at night, or to ambush them by day. They didn’t even try to do so. That illustrates how they had come to appreciate the biggest advantage of state government: the bringing of peace. (149)

But if, as Diamond has it, the “biggest advantage of state government” is “the bringing of peace,” then why is there war, almost constant war, between states? If modern centralized states are able to disarm and pacify tribal societies with

2. Jared Diamond, *The World until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (New York: Viking, 2012), 147–48. Subsequent citations are made parenthetically in the text.

ease, then why are states incapable of disarming themselves? The more modern the state, it would seem, the more resistant it is likely to be to arms reduction, let alone to disarmament.

Diamond appears to see no conflict, or even an interesting problem to pursue, in the coexistence of (a) the state's capacity to maintain peace within its borders, (b) the state's capacity to establish and maintain peace by intervention in the affairs of nonstate societies, and (c) the incapacity of the state system to maintain peace between one state and another. What characteristics (a) and (b) share with (c) is the capacity and willingness on the part of individual states to impose their will by means of lethal force. Diamond does note that, unlike nonstate societies, where justice is "of the do-it-yourself sort," "states have their own separate interests in settling disputes and administering justice. . . . Those state interests don't necessarily coincide with the interests of either participant in a dispute" (87). To Diamond, this difference between state and nonstate justice defines the superiority of the state; to me, it suggests that the nonstate society, reluctant to muster the power required to enforce collective will on the individual, must find subtler means of persuasion. What an armed and centralized state does to establish and maintain peace, whether within its own borders or within those of a foreign people, can look and doubtless feel exactly like war. Diamond does observe that, when "occasionally" tribesmen "dared to attack" the armed Australians, they were "shot." In a review of Diamond's book, James C. Scott puts this main point concisely: "It does not follow that the state, by curtailing 'private' violence, reduces the total amount of violence."³

It seems to me (perhaps Scott would agree) that Diamond ought to have mentioned that the Australians curtailed tribal violence, during the 1950s, only after state violence had brought privation and bloodshed worse than any the New Guineans had experienced before. From January 1942 until August 1945, New Guinea was a key battleground of World War II: some 216,000 warriors sent by the governments of Japan, Australia, and the United States lost their lives. About 18,000 New Guineans joined the campaign in supporting roles; thousands of villagers were displaced during military operations, and hundreds died of starvation. What did the New Guineans gain by their cooperation with Australia and the state system? In what way is it better to die fighting an alien state, empire, or alliance (most New Guineans joined the Allied forces; some joined the Japanese) than to die fighting a neighboring village? Despite what seems to me the obvious answers to these questions (*Nothing* and *In no way*), Diamond takes the Hobbesian line that only the state stands between humanity and its inhuman predilections. Again, in Scott's words:

3. James C. Scott, "Crops, Towns, Government," *London Review of Books*, November 21, 2013, 13–15, at 14.

Diamond reaches the same conclusion as Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*:⁴ we know, on the basis of certain contemporary hunter-gatherers, that our ancestors were violent and homicidal and that they have only recently (very recently in Pinker's account) been pacified and civilised by the state. Life without the state is nasty, brutish, and short. Though Hobbes is not directly invoked, his gloomy view of savage life without a sovereign infuses Diamond's narrative.⁵

A reader aware that Scott advocates improvisational self-government, "anarchist calisthenics," and the "arts of resistance" will be unsurprised by his argument, "contra Diamond," that, while "there is plenty of violence in the world of hunter-gatherers," it is "almost entirely a state-effect. It simply cannot be understood historically from 4000 BC forward apart from the appetite of states for trade goods, slaves and precious ores."⁶ Scott furthermore contends that "non-state peoples have many techniques for avoiding bloodshed and revenge killings: the payment of compensation or Weregild, arranged truces ('burying the hatchet'), marriage alliances, flight to the open frontier, outcasting or handing over a culprit who started the trouble. . . . These practices are examined by many of the ethnographers who have carried out intensive fieldwork in the New Guinea Highlands."⁷

Diamond, in other words, had sufficient—arguably ample—evidence at hand to make a case that, in matters of peacemaking as in matters of language, religion, health, and ecology, "we" have much to learn from the practices of non- and premodern societies. Diamond's position, however, is that tribal ways and means of making peace are nontransferable, because "the participants in almost any traditional New Guinea dispute were previously known to each other. . . . Traditional New Guineans rarely or never encountered complete 'strangers,' as do we citizens of modern state societies" (87–88). We in modern state societies cannot learn from tribespeople because we lack *x*; lacking *x* is, in part, what makes us modern; ergo, we cannot learn from tribespeople—Diamond's argu-

4. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2011).

5. Scott, "Crops, Towns, Government," 14.

6. Scott, "Crops, Towns, Government," 15. See also James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), as well as the multiple reviews of his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) in *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 525–46.

7. Scott, "Crops, Towns, Government," 14. Papuans have objected vigorously to Diamond's claims about the positive contributions made to their indigenous societies by states (Australia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Indonesia) and have offered cogent evidence against his assertion that, from the first, the Papuans have accepted with gratitude the changes imposed on their traditional way of life. See, for instance, Jason McLeod, "Jared Diamond: Don't Assist the Indonesian Occupation," West Papua Media Alerts, February 22, 2013, westpapua.media.info/2013/02/22/jared-diamond-dont-assist-the-indonesian-occupation/.

ment begs the question. If modern societies were not unlike traditional societies, we would have less, perhaps nothing, to learn from them; learning from them demands our finding ways of being, in this or that respect, more like them. The obvious response to Diamond's demurrals, for anyone open to learning about conciliation from traditional practices, is that denizens of modern state societies should get to know each other in person and in depth. In modern conflict resolution, Diamond writes, "establishing guilt or negligence or punishment according to Western concepts" is the main issue, whereas it is "reestablishing relationships" that "counts for everything in traditional New Guinea" (89). Then he narrates the case of a Goti friend that is meant to startle readers into the realization that modern and traditional ideas of peace and peacemaking are incommensurable. It seems that the Goti villagers and "four other clans" had become "embroiled"

in a long series of raids and reciprocal killings, in the course of which the father and an older brother of my Goti friend Pius were killed. . . . Not until 33 years later did the Gotis feel safe enough to move back to their ancestral land. Three years after that, to put a definitive end to living under fear of raids, they hosted a Goti ceremony of reconciliation, in which the Gotis paid compensation of pigs and other goods to their former attackers. . . . "*You paid them compensation?*" I asked him. "*But they killed your father . . . why aren't they paying you?*" No, explained Pius, that's not how it works; the goal wasn't to extract payment for its own sake, nor to pretend to equalize accounts. . . . The goal was instead to reestablish peaceful relations between recent enemies, and to make it possible to live safely again at Goti Village. (89)

The italics in Diamond's account serve to guide the reader's response. They prompt us to conclude that our ideas of justice and reconciliation are so different from (and, implicitly, so far advanced beyond) those of Goti villagers that there is no point in our studying them except as curiosities. If, however, you can resist the allure of italics, you may instead find that Diamond's evidence suggests we should reconsider the linkages that we unthinkingly make between peace and justice, truth and peace.⁸ The narrative of Diamond's friend Pius and Diamond's reaction to it tell us not that Pius is from Venus and Diamond from Mars, but that Pius prefers peace to justice and truth.

Diamond, however, is fully conscious of what peace takes to arrange and of what the citizens of modern states could learn from the praxis of primitives.

8. For more on these two linkages and their negative effects, see Jeffrey M. Perl, "Civilian Scholarship," *Common Knowledge* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 1–6, and "Preface" to *Peace and Mind: Civilian Scholarship from "Common Knowledge,"* ed. Perl (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2011), vii–xlvii.

He reports wistfully that, “when Western missionaries who have lived in New Guinea with their young children return to Australia or the United States . . . they describe feeling ashamed of themselves if they play competitive games in order to win” (92). “In modern state societies,” he points out, we “not only permit, we actually encourage, individuals to advance themselves, to win, and to gain advantage at the expense of others. . . . We aim to maximize our own profit. . . . Even children’s games in the U.S. commonly are contests of winning and losing. That isn’t so in traditional New Guinea society, where children’s play involves cooperation rather than winning and losing” (91). And he relates, again wistfully, observations of Jane Goodall on the games that Kaulong children play in New Britain:

Instead of a contest in which each child sought to win the biggest banana, each child cut his/her banana into two equal halves, ate one half, offered the other half to another child, and in turn received half of that child’s banana. Then each child proceeded to cut that uneaten half of the banana into two equal quarters, ate one of the quarters, offered the other quarter to another child, and received another uneaten quarter banana in return. The game went on for five cycles, as the residual piece of banana was broken into equal eighths, then into equal sixteenths, until finally each child ate the stub representing one-thirty-second of the original banana from still another child. (91)

If learning as children to play share-the-banana instead of win-the-banana games is what it takes, then nothing stands in the way of peaceful living except the preference for agonistic triumph. From Goti villagers and Kaulong children we can learn the lesson, which apparently is not self-evident, that learning to live in peace is what it takes to live in peace.

“War is politics by other means” is a nostrum retailed by and for people who, as children, played win-the-banana games and won. I regret to say that such people include not only politicians, political journalists, and military strategists, but also some intellectuals, those who write the textbooks for programs in conflict resolution, international relations, diplomacy, and public affairs. In those texts, peace is understood as what war achieves for the victor. Peace is the undivided big banana. But an undivided prize is a contested prize and, in time, may become a *casus belli*. While the premise of this new symposium in *Common Knowledge* is that reliance on modern notions of rationality and self-interest, realism and idealism, nationality and ethnicity, power and rights, is futile or counter-productive, we will be interested less in criticizing the assumptions of conflict-resolution theory than in augmenting its limited repertoire with ethnographic, historical, and literary examples. Contributions to this ongoing venture will analyze and detail ways in which non-Western and premodern European societies have precluded the development of enmities, or have overcome enmities already

flourishing, through means that modern theorists of conflict resolution might be reluctant to credit or incompetent to assess. Nor will we shrink from embracing work on imaginary social orders—in fiction, myth, and the arts—where enmities are resolved through maneuvers, spells, and contraptions that, as they say, are good to think with. Our purpose, after all, is to leave the congested thoroughfare and move toward peace by other means.

—*Jeffrey M. Perl*