

Questioning Collapse

*Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability,
and the Aftermath of Empire*

Edited by

PATRICIA A. McANANY

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

NORMAN YOFFEE

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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Excusing the Haves and Blaming the Have-Nots in the Telling of History

Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz*

We admit to being chauvinists of anthropology. We respect our discipline because of what it demands as well as what it can provide. In effect, anthropology insists that to understand people in other places and in different times – to understand what they want and seek – we must often scrutinize our own understandings, our own (often early) responses and appraisals. Anthropology urges us – and helps us – to examine our own taken-for-granted ideas about why and how people act: our ideas about human nature, about the causes and objectives of human action, about the ways people intend one thing to follow from another, about how and why people engage in collective action. We must recognize that not everyone in the world has the same objectives as (many) contemporary Americans, wanting and seeking the same sorts of things as we do. This is to say, we must be aware of historical and cultural context. We must recognize that our own desires and lives, like the desires and lives of others elsewhere, are historically and culturally constructed. To think about such things, which is to say, to think not only about how differently located others think and live, but also about how we think and live, can be a sobering, if not a daunting, experience. However, working hard – taking care – to get such matters relatively right can be very much worth doing, both intellectually liberating and politically significant.

In this chapter we would like to illustrate why examining our taken-for-granted explanations is both intellectually liberating and politically significant. To this end, we take as our topic the ways in which

a famous biologist, Jared Diamond, has sought to explain human history in his two major and widely read books, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and *Collapse*, which has been less generally praised, but praised nonetheless.¹ From our anthropological perspective, these books, while in many ways impressive and compelling, are problematic. We should make it clear at the outset that we discuss Diamond's books because they have become such popular and influential examples of a more general trend in the telling of history. This is a trend that, in basing history on what appear to be commonsense (Western) suppositions, makes complex political processes into simple, inevitable laws – laws that absolve (those Diamond calls) the “haves” from any real responsibility for oppressing (and creating) the “have nots.” It is a history that may justify expansionism as an expression of legitimate self-interest. It is a history that, for example, allows many of us to celebrate Thanksgiving without pondering much about why Native Americans have significantly less to be thankful for. It is a history that links manifest destiny at home to shock and awe policies abroad. And it is a history that may serve to render the “have-nots” into a bunch of left-behind losers who resent (if not hate) the “haves” out of envy.

ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA: DESIRE WITHIN A COLONIAL CONTEXT

In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond begins by addressing a plaintive question posed by a local political leader he encountered on a Papua New Guinea beach in the early 1970s. Yali, active as a so-called cargo-cultist in the region around Madang, asked Diamond, “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo [items of Western manufacture] and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?”² Diamond answers this question by presenting the seemingly inevitable and inexorable unfolding of global patterns. These patterns, he believes, are the result of the geographical differences that allowed certain people to have the power of guns, germs, and steel on their side, power that they would (apparently) always use to maximal effect in the domination of others. It has been the use of this power – a power that stems from the luck-of-the-environmental draw – that Diamond argues has accounted for “history’s haves and have-nots.”³

Diamond assumes that Yali was upset primarily because he wanted more "cargo" – more Western stuff. But we are not so sure.⁴ In fact, we think it important to step back from a likely first response that "of course" Yali would value Western things and to wonder what he – as a "have-not" – might have actually sought. We also think it important to ask why, living as he did during the mid-twentieth century, was Yali unable to get whatever it was that he wanted from the "haves" – mostly Australian colonists. After all, he had long lived among these colonists and had served them with great distinction during World War II.

We never met Yali. Consequently we do not know for sure what he meant in his question to Diamond. However, we have made numerous research trips to Papua New Guinea (beginning in 1968 for Fred and 1973 for Deborah) and do know something of what other Papua New Guineans (including some who did know Yali) were asking for – and about – at the time. And, as well, we do know something of the way many anthropologists working in New Guinea (and elsewhere) have explained why people desire one thing or another. Below we convey these anthropological ideas about desire before we return to a consideration of Yali's question: of what he might have wanted and why he could not get it.

Most anthropologists argue that what people want tends to be socially constructed. In particular, they have found that what people ask for is shaped by their history and in turn shapes their history. This is to say, what people want is formed in the context of narratives: stories they are told and tell about the way the world works or might work, stories about what human beings might plausibly hope for.

Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, in a famous paper titled "The Decomposition of an Event," illustrates well such a social construction of desire in discussing those who were first contacted in the 1930s by Australian explorers in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea's interior.⁵ The Australians assumed that these Papua New Guineans were impressed with their complex technology – for example, guns and steel. Yet, in Strathern's view, possession of this novel technology initially marked these explorers as spirits, and, from the perspectives of Papua New Guinea Highlanders, the appearance of spirits among the living was extraordinary but ultimately not very consequential. Spirits, after all, would likely disappear without affecting social interactions

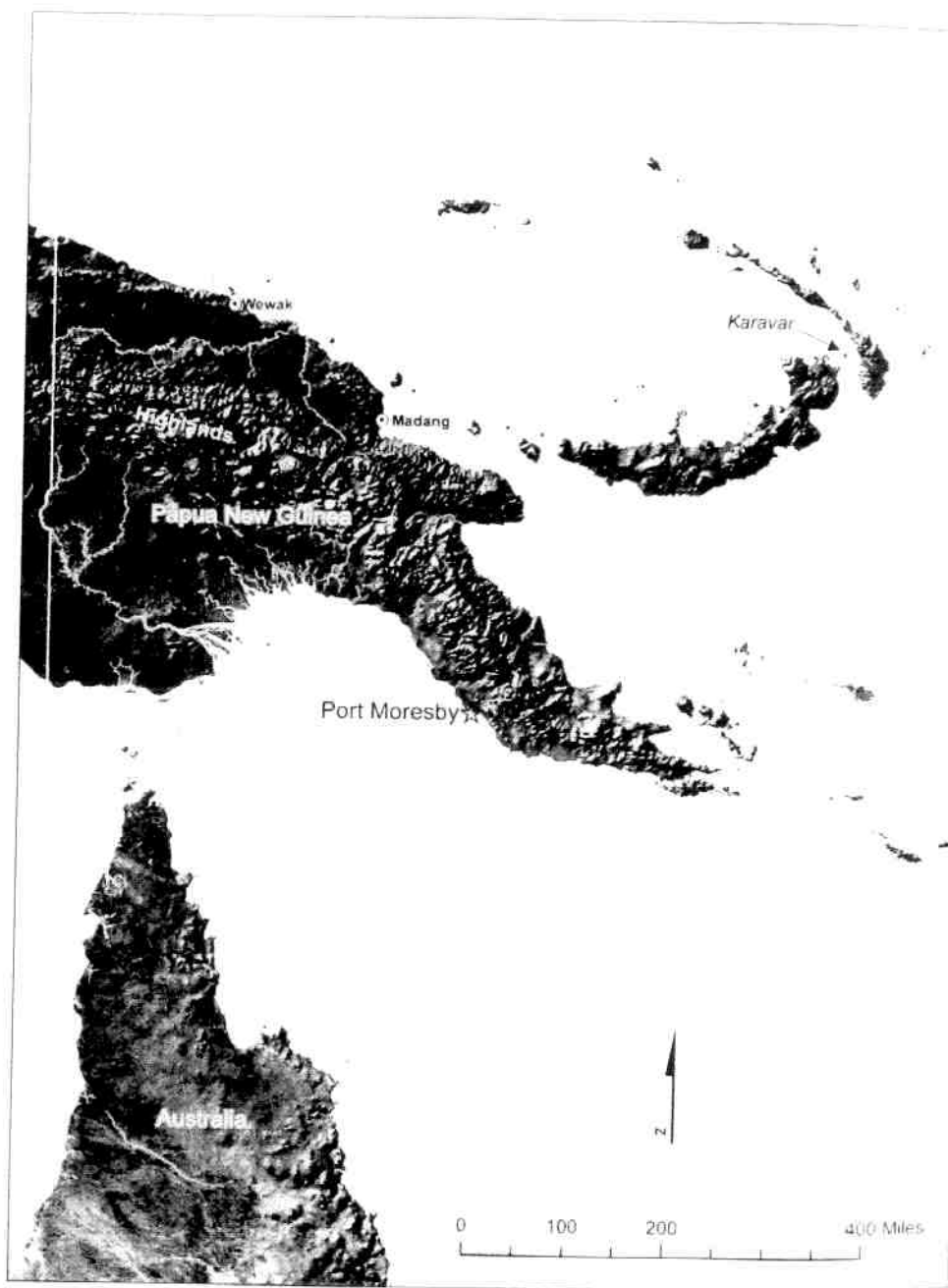


FIGURE 12.1 Papua New Guinea

very much. Only when Highlanders discovered that these Australians both had large quantities of pearl shells and wished to transact with them did the Australians become plausibly human. Pearl shells, traded up from the coast, were for a long time central in the Highland exchanges through which marriages were contracted, compensation for death or injury was paid, and alliances were effected within and between groups. In other words, only when the Australians showed that they apparently valued what the Highlanders already valued and desired did the Highlanders regard them as interesting and socially significant. Only then could the Highlanders fit these otherwise strange and fundamentally peripheral beings into their own narratives (again, stories people tell about the way the world works or might work) as full human beings: as they became persons with whom they could, and would want to, interact. Only at this point did these whites appear to enter history – Highlands style – as people who were and would continue to be social players. This is to say, that the way Highlanders understood what was happening around them and the way that they reacted to what happened depended, in significant part, on their expectations for the future – expectations shaped by local conventions, by the stories they told about the past, present, and future.

To be sure, Yali's people, who lived along the coast of Papua New Guinea, had a much longer history of European contact. (Some coastal peoples engaged extensively with Europeans since the latter part of the nineteenth century.) Yali, himself, had especially extensive contact with Europeans. He served as a policeman in New Guinea's colonial administration before World War II and as a member of the Allied Intelligence Service during the war. There is a photograph taken in 1944 in the Australian War Memorial archives commemorating his military service, in which Yali is inside the *Dace*, an American submarine, together with other members of his company of intelligence-gathering "Coastwatchers." In advance of a major Allied landing, Yali's group of twelve – seven Europeans, one Indonesian translator, and four Papua New Guineans – was sent to Hollandia, then Dutch New Guinea, on a hazardous mission to gather strategic information. In the picture Yali and the other men are posed next to their weapons in obviously cramped, machinery-packed quarters. After the war, as a distinguished veteran, Yali



FIGURE 12.2 Sergeant Yali and his comrades on the World War II submarine *Dace*. Yali is second from left in the front row. (Permission to publish negative PO1090.001 granted by the Australian War Memorial)

embarked on a controversial political career, one that kept him in extensive contact with Europeans.

Yet, like the Highlanders Strathern describes, Yali's life and aspirations followed a largely Papua New Guinean historical narrative. In outline, this historical narrative focuses less on the material attributes of things themselves than on the social uses to which things are put. Things have value because they can be used in transactions to establish relationships of recognition and respect. Things are more like gifts than commodities, establishing qualitative relationships between the people exchanging them rather than quantitative ones between the items exchanged.¹⁶ The major point of these transactions, thus, is to establish relationships of obligation, alliance, and friendship rather than to get "good deals." Therefore, when Highlanders desired pearl shells, and they did desire them with a passionate intensity, it was not for the sake of the shells alone. Indeed, many anthropologists have made a similar point about coastal Papua New Guineans – that men there acquired coveted shells (including the famous "kula" valuables) so as to be able to give them away at a later time.

Because the Highlanders were relatively inexperienced in European ways, they apparently thought that the explorers were generous in offering them the coveted pearl shells that affirmed their fundamental worth. In contrast, the coastal peoples long before learned that the colonists were stingy, offering them only meager wages that denied a common humanity – a common humanness. Moreover, exacerbating raw feelings was local recognition that whites had real and intrusive power. Certainly colonial administrators sought to bring many aspects of native life under their discipline, and they could certainly punish those who, by flouting their directives, challenged their power. Indeed, Yali was to spend nearly six years in jail during the 1950s for his recalcitrance.

Yali and many other Papua New Guineans became preoccupied with the reluctance, if not refusal, of many whites to recognize their full humanness – to make blacks and whites equal players in the same history. In their efforts to establish the transactions, the exchanges, on which the elusive equality would be based, many Papua New Guineans sought, often through magical and ritual means, the European things – the “cargo” – that whites so evidently valued. Without denying that some European possessions – matches and steel tools among them – may have had immediate appeal, it would be an error to believe that it was the things alone that interested them. Rather, with these things, they hoped to become interesting and socially significant (exchange-worthy) to the Europeans. In an important book about “cargo cults,” *Road Belong Cargo*, anthropologist Peter Lawrence, who knew Yali well, says as much in his definition of such cargo cults:

[Such a cult] is based on the natives' belief that European goods (cargo) – ships, aircraft, trade articles, and military equipment – are not man-made but have to be obtained from a non-human or divine source. It expresses the followers' dissatisfaction with their status in colonial society, which is to be improved imminently or eventually by the acquisition of new wealth. It has, therefore, a disruptive influence and is regarded by the ... Australian Administration ... as one of the [its] most serious problems.⁷

Deeply resenting their inferiority in colonial society, coastal Papua New Guineans sought for decades to improve their status by gaining access to cargo. During Fred's early Papua New Guinea research on the island of Karavar (in 1968 and 1972), local people remained

preoccupied with gaining long-denied respect from Europeans. In discussing their contemporary cargo activities (which focused on learning how to place an order such that a small payment would elicit a shipload of manufactured items), they described a history of their efforts to compel Europeans to recognize mutual humanness. In particular, they referred to the "dog movement," a series of meetings they held during the 1930s. The question addressed with perplexity and anger at these meetings was why the Europeans persisted in treating them with contempt – driving them away, telling them to get out, as if they were unwelcome dogs. Through obtaining cargo, they sought to win European respect by having that which Europeans so obviously valued.⁸

Over a considerable period of time, Papua New Guineans frequently sought to acquire and master the ritual techniques by which Europeans accessed cargo. Influenced by Yali or other cargo-cult leaders, they tried a combination of recalcitrance and ritual experimentation. They interrupted and transformed normal routines: they refused to pay taxes, repudiated the directions of colonial administrators, established alternative governments, wrested theological control from missionaries, and mobilized villages, if not whole regions, in fervent invocation and prophesy. As Lawrence makes clear in his definition of cargo cults, Papua New Guineans, in their choice of such means, often became interesting and socially significant in ways the Europeans considered undesirable – in ways that provoked greater exercise of European power and made recognition of mutual equality even less likely.

Thus, we think that Diamond misunderstands what many Papua New Guineans desired when he explains the background to Yali's question (about the differences between white and black people). In Diamond's words: "whites had arrived, imposed centralized government, and brought material goods whose value New Guineans instantly recognized, ranging from steel axes, matches, and medicines to clothing, soft drinks, and umbrellas. In New Guinea all these goods were referred to collectively as 'cargo.'⁹ Because Diamond misunderstands that Yali really was asking less about cargo per se than about colonial relationships between white and black people, he describes the introduction of centralized government as almost parenthetical to the indisputable fact that whites

and their goods had arrived. Hence, he presents local resentment as directed not at the nature and use of concerted colonial power so much as at the differential access to goods.

Perhaps consistent with Diamond's focus on cargo per se is his use of the word "goods." To call things "goods" means that they are inherently desirable – instantly recognizable as worth acquiring. Yet, as we know from advertising, many things become desirable only when they are defined repeatedly as such. Moreover, in defining cargo as goods, Diamond implies that local people will do whatever it takes to get such things. This kind of account suggests that, in their desire for these goods, local people are the agents of their own domination.¹⁹ (Another example would be of the Native Americans who, ostensibly, wanted beads so badly that they were willing to trade Manhattan Island for just a few dollars worth of them. Although they may have liked beads, they never thought that they were selling their land for them since land was not, in their view, alienable as a commodity. Their probable intent was to establish an exchange relationship with the Dutch colonists.) Such a goods-centered rendition of history, we think, serves to displace attention from the nature of colonial power relationships. These relationships are not vested in the "nature of things." They are not inevitable because of the instantly recognized value of manufactured items – even granting that some items might be quite useful. Instead, colonial relationships are imposed, often to the resentment and resistance of local people.

That Papua New Guineans such as Yali wanted cargo, less because they recognized its inherent value, and more because they desired to transform the colonial relations of inequality between whites and blacks, was echoed in many Papua New Guineans' narratives. These narratives elaborated a sense of being ill appreciated and ill used. These stories often presented Papua New Guineans and Europeans as sharing a prior history of social obligations. They were, in effect, arguments designed to demonstrate European immorality in denying this history and in behaving in ways that were inappropriately, almost inhumanly, asocial. As Lawrence demonstrates in his analysis of cargo cults, Papua New Guineans often understood and represented this prior history in a range of changing forms. For Yali and others of his region, this history of social obligation was conveyed through myths, Christian beliefs, and accounts of wartime service.

For instance, some of these stories focused on a mythic brother who, after teaching cargo secrets to Europeans abroad, was prevented by Europeans from returning to instruct his brother remaining at home. Some, on Christian beliefs about the kinship of blacks and whites as descendants of the same original parents. And some, on the wartime actions of Papua New Guineans who jeopardized their own safety by saving Australians from death and capture. All of these stories were told as proof that Australians should recognize them as equals. This history of social obligation, in all its variations, showed that for reasons of fairness, kinship, and/or alliance, Papua New Guineans not only were worthy recipients of such recognition, but also were owed this recognition and the transformed future that would follow.

We are, thus, arguing that Yali and other Papua New Guineans were preoccupied with "cargo" for reasons less obvious than might be initially thought – for reasons more related to their "common sense" than to ours. As anthropologists, to repeat a point we made at the beginning of this chapter, we are suspicious of particular kinds of interpretations that are "too easy" – too readily consonant with a familiar cultural view of how the world works. We feel a disciplinary imperative to probe more deeply. Certainly, as anthropologists, we need to be mindful of ethnographic context – and (for example) to work hard to see things from the perspectives of Papua New Guineans. At the same time, we need to be mindful of the mind-set we bring to any particular ethnographic context: we have to work hard to be clear about our own taken-for-granted assumptions. It is in this latter regard that we fault Diamond's larger argument. His interpretation of Papua New Guinea aside, we think that his broader argument about the course of human history is flawed because it does not question crucial taken-for-granted assumptions. Although we do not doubt that guns, germs, and steel were necessary to make certain historical outcomes possible, including those so upsetting to Yali, we do not have to assume that their possession was sufficient to explain these outcomes. In so assuming, Diamond conflates necessary with sufficient causes.

The perspective that there is an inevitable and inexorable course of human history rests on what seems to us to be an implicit – and unexamined – view of human nature. This is a culturally familiar view of human beings as necessarily seeking to extract maximum

advantage over others: give a guy – any guy – half a chance, and he will conquer the world; give a guy a piece of appropriate metal, and he will inevitably fashion a sword to cut you down; give a guy a piece of appropriate metal, and he will inevitably fashion a chain to enslave you within the hold of a ship bound for a New World hell hole. In a way that many in the contemporary West may find seemingly self-evident – once again, in a way that does not question the way the world works – those who hold such a view suggest that people everywhere and at all times, if they had sufficient power, would necessarily use it in seeking to maximize their own advantage through the domination of others. This implicit view of a transhistorical and transcultural human nature is consistent with Diamond's argument, an argument that renders both historical context and cultural perspective as irrelevant – an argument that many contemporary anthropologists challenge.

It is the case that Yali was poor and that, as Diamond makes clear in his discussion of Pizarro's conquest, the people of the New World were brutally conquered by representatives of the Old.¹¹ It is also the case that those who beat up on other people have the capacity to do so. However, as anthropologist Raymond Kelly indicates in his book *Warless Societies and the Origin of War*, human beings always are capable of a range of behaviors, and they always are capable of engaging with each other and their neighbors in a range of ways.¹² They might make war, but they also might make peace. Whether they choose one or the other is powerfully affected by the particular contexts in which people live: by their historically and culturally located ideas about what is worth striving for and why.

Additionally and importantly, to argue that culture and historical context matter not only challenges a vision of history as an inevitable expression of geographic advantage and human nature, it also introduces the possibility that powerful actors (such as Pizarro), operating as they do within historical and cultural contexts, may appropriately be held accountable for some of history's outcomes. Since it has become clear to anthropologists that cultures contain multiple perspectives about alternatives and how they might be pursued and otherwise dealt with, it follows that human beings – especially the well-positioned ones – have a measure of choice about how to act. Thus, for instance, from American ideas of the worth of the individual, one can generate

political perspectives as diverse as libertarianism and welfare statism: the first position holding that no individual should be interfered with or regulated; the other, that no individual should be neglected or deprived. The existence of such alternatives means that those with guns, germs, and steel may, realistically, be held accountable for the choices they make.

We find this stipulation important both in combating the kind of world history represented by *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and in constructing an aspect of Papua New Guinea's more particular one. Pizarro had the capacity and resources to behave with remarkable brutality in the New World. But the mere capacity to behave brutally does not absolve him from having done so. Likewise, Europeans had the resources to treat Yali and other Papua New Guineans with contempt. But that position should not absolve them from having done so. Such considerations, we argue, are important in rethinking – in reevaluating – historical outcomes. (Perhaps the haves may be prompted to do such rethinking by recognizing that the have-nots may already have come to their own conclusions.)

Thus, we must carefully scrutinize taken-for-granted ideas about what people want and why. Although it is difficult to think against the grain of the familiar, we must stretch our imaginations if we want to understand whose perspectives are projected at whose expense – if, to reiterate, we want to replace a history of (apparent) inevitability with one of (potential) accountability.

ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA: COPING WITHIN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

In *Collapse*, the story of why certain societies have experienced environmental disaster, Diamond shifts to a different kind of history: one that acknowledges not only the possibility, but also the importance, of choice. The subtitle to his book indeed is “how societies *choose* to fail or succeed” (emphasis ours). Moreover, in focusing on choice, such a history does potentially become less inevitable and actors, more accountable. Hence, in describing why it would be unfair to treat native peoples poorly, Diamond writes: “it’s based on a moral principle, namely, that it is morally wrong for one people to dispossess, subjugate, or exterminate another people.”¹³

Nonetheless, we see continuities between the arguments of both of Diamond's books. In neither does he adequately consider context to think through how goals and choices are historically and culturally shaped and constrained. Indeed, in neither book does he challenge assumptions that echo the perspectives of the powerful: those who control others, those whose choices outweigh – constrain – the choices of others. Thus, in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* he assumes that everyone will inevitably choose to dominate; in *Collapse* he assumes that everyone will have an equal capacity to choose. In effect, whereas in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* no one is held responsible for the course of history, in *Collapse* just about everyone is. And in both histories, it is, we think, the have-nots (the Yali's, so to speak) who end up with the historical raw deal when their lives and circumstances are misread. *Collapse*, in our view, exemplifies a kind of history that, in ignoring context, clouds our understanding of the processes actually affecting the world today – including the serious environmental problems it faces.

Diamond does grant in *Collapse* that "social institutions and cultural values ... affect whether the society solves (or even tries to solve) its [environmental] problems."¹¹ Yet, he believes that (vile dictatorships, such as that once in power in Haiti, aside) societies are free to make, and, correspondingly, responsible for making environmentally sound choices. This is the case even in the oft-cited "tragedy of the commons" wherein people do not solve an unfolding environmental problem because of selfishness, clashes of interest, or the belief that if each doesn't take a full share, another will. The result is a general depletion of resources, which might precipitate collapse. The obvious solution, from Diamond's perspective, is for people to "trust and communicate with each other" so as to realize that they "share a common future."¹² If they fail to come to this realization, they should be held responsible for having made bad choices. As we have suggested, we do think that those with power should be held responsible for the choices they make. However, we also think it is crucial to probe the contexts in which the choices of some may constrain those of others. Below we present our argument concerning the importance of such a probing with reference to one of the primary cases in *Collapse*, that of Papua New Guinea's silviculture – past and present.

The case begins in the Highland valleys some 7,000 years ago, with archaeological evidence that humans were clearing forests and draining swamps to provide land for their gardens. These agriculturally based populations expanded over the next 5,000 years or so – eventually becoming the largest and densest populations in New Guinea. And, as their numbers grew, a decrease in forest pollen and an increase in nonforest pollen indicate that they continued to clear their forests to make way for crops and to obtain timber and fuel. Then, about 1,200 years ago, a volcanic eruption deposited an enormous amount of ash in the Highlands, enhancing soil fertility and, hence, crop growth. This, in turn, likely stimulated population increase, which put additional pressure on resources. Such changes might have resulted in ecosystemic collapse had the Highlanders not somehow addressed their linked problems of population growth and deforestation.

Their solution, as shown by the pollen record, lay in silviculture, which focused on a particular and most useful tree: cultivation of *Casuarina oligodon*, indeed, proved a boon for expanding – increasingly land-short – populations. Because this tree fixes nitrogen in its root nodules, adds additional nitrogen as well as carbon to the soil through its copious leaf-fall, and is fast growing, it could decrease the fallow period necessary in garden rotations as well as provide fuel and building materials. In addition, the tree could reduce erosion when planted on steep slopes and (for reasons still unknown) diminish the depredations of the taro beetle. Diamond suggests that people “in any village could see the deforestation going on around them, could recognize the lower growth rates of their crops as gardens lost fertility after being initially cleared, and experienced the consequences of timber and fuel scarcity.”¹⁰ Concurrently Highlanders – always curious and experimental – must have noticed casuarinas growing by streams, brought them home, planted them, and observed their numerous beneficial effects. Thus, through silviculture – and other means including population control by infanticide, post-partum sexual taboos, contraception, abortion, and warfare – Highlanders were able to avoid “collapse.”

For Diamond the adoption of casuarina silviculture was a type of “bottom-up problem-solving” in “ultra-democratic” societies in which decisions were “reached by means of everybody in the village



FIGURE 12.3 Casuarina trees in Papua New Guinea.

sitting down together and talking, and talking, and talking.”⁷ This Highlands instance becomes important to Diamond as a model for the making of environmental choices.

Before continuing with this model of decision making, we should briefly note that there are aspects of his depiction of Highlands activities that could be challenged or qualified. For instance, it has become obvious, given the work of Paula Brown and George da Buchbinder in their collection of essays *Man and Woman in the New Guinea Highlands* that decisions there were more likely made by men than by “everybody.”⁸ Moreover, Buchbinder, in her Ph.D. dissertation, “*Maring Microadaptation*,” and William Clarke, in his book *Place and People*, have shown that environmental deterioration and poor diet have persisted in the Highlands, at least for some.⁹ Finally, it seems likely that the growing of casuarina trees probably did not require much collective consultation and deliberation among Highlanders. Once someone got the idea (at least that cultivated trees could be a convenient source of wood), their propagation would be a relatively straightforward, easily emulated practice – something people could just do without much discussion to meet their own evident needs.

However, these concerns about precontact Highland ecological decision making aside, what about Diamond’s basic proposition that this form of bottom-up decision making might be a model of how contemporary societies could make successful environmental choices? In

thinking through the present-day relevance of this model, we must consider not just the obvious point that the context of precontact Highlands decision making no longer exists for contemporary Papua New Guineans. We must also recognize that the transformation of this context has been linked to the transformation of our own. All of us are now living in a world shaped significantly by a mutual history (what we have elsewhere called a "twisted history"), one in which haves and have-nots have emerged through mutual – although certainly asymmetrical – engagements.²⁹

To think more about the relevance of a model of bottom-up decision making to environmentally consequential choices in a contemporary world of mutually engaging haves and have-nots, let us continue with Papua New Guinea silviculture in its most current manifestation – as the subject of a predatory, foreign-controlled logging industry exporting tropical timber to the haves.

We agree with Diamond's description of Papua New Guinean logging practices. International logging companies, with home offices mainly in Malaysia, lease logging rights on land still owned by local people. They often acquire logging permits through bribes to government officials or through promises to local people of money, roads, schools, and hospitals – promises on which they may make only minimal down payments. At one site we visited in the East Sepik Province near Wewak – and this proved a hardly extreme instance – the logging company had landed a barge at a remote beach (and was prepared to dynamite the reef if necessary to get on shore). From the barge rolled bulldozers that carved a logging road over which trucks and other machinery traveled to extract high-value tropical timber. Clear-cutting the ridges because they were easy to access, loggers left a broad swath littered with discarded low-value trees. Our visit was only several weeks after the company had, with no notice, concluded its operation, winding it all back into the barge, which departed for its next, to use Diamond's apt phrase, "rape-and-run" operation.³⁰ The adverse consequences were obvious. Animal habitats had been substantially destroyed, and adjacent streams and rivers were already becoming choked through erosion. Moreover, the logging road, which had been presented to local people as a significant infrastructural benefit, was slipping off the hillside. With the next heavy rain, it would become impassable.

And, as often happens, the cash the company did pay local people had appeared enormous to them, but would be soon gone on consumables – on food, beer, bride prices, and rapidly disintegrating motor vehicles (given the state of local roads). Yet many of those Papua New Guineans to whom we spoke looked forward to further logging in their area – albeit by a different company such as the (Malaysian) one associated with the province's most prominent politician (and the nation's current prime minister), Sir Michael Somare. Their enthusiasm for logging operations seemed comparable to that of the Ipili, another group living in the Highlands, for the mining taking place on their land. Indeed, in a paper entitled "Who Is the 'Original Affluent Society'?" Alex Golub, one of the anthropologists who has worked among the Ipili, says that they were happy about the mine on their territory – happy to have "traded their mountain for development."²² Moreover, in "Deep Holes: Community Responses to Mining in Melanesia," Colin Filer and Martha Macintyre report that local people often continue to welcome mining on their land with eagerness.²³

How are we to make sense of this? One perspective has it that trading one's mountain for development is an example of a bad choice – one that should be reappraised by those with the courage to do so. Diamond does lament that few Papua New Guineans at both the local and national levels would act like the small-island-dwelling Tikopians who had the "courage to eliminate their ecologically destructive pigs, even though pigs are the sole large domestic animal and a principal status symbol of Melanesian societies."²⁴ (For the sake of accuracy, Tikopians are not Melanesians, but Polynesians.) Or, to bring the case closer to Papua New Guinea, he laments that few would exhibit the (remarkable) courage of one Aloysius, who, we are told, braved death threats from logging companies to protect the environment.²⁵

While we would not applaud such environmentally costly decisions as to trade one's forest or mountain for cash – and while we genuinely admire the likes of Aloysius – we do find the Papua New Guinean desire for money to be spent on consumables understandable in a contemporary context: a context in which worth is now constructed, not only through local, valley-wide references, but through global ones. In other words, we do find such decisions, allowing as they do the have-nots a glory day, much more than simply bad choices. In

fact, to think of such decisions as simply bad choices is to obscure the conditions of such choices and, thus, to limit effective responses to them.

Concerning the conditions of choice: We must inquire what it means to hold local Papua New Guineans – again, largely have-nots – responsible for living within their ecological means in a postcolonial, market-driven, global system ostensibly based on the capacity of all to make choices. It is, of course, hard for such people to exercise effective choice in dealing with their own corrupt and powerful politicians, not to mention with voracious and sometimes murderous logging companies. And there is an additional constraint on choice because they live in a world increasingly coerced by the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund to operate according to ideas of “comparative advantage” – a world in which what Papua New Guineans do have to offer is (the likes of) timber and gold. Furthermore and importantly, such people often recognize that they not only lack real power, but are, as well, seen by the haves as lacking real power – seen as the have-nots. Hence, the world of the haves and have-nots is not just an outcome of a historical process that has allowed some to dominate others (with the aid of guns, germs, and steel); it is a rankling and ongoing circumstance that conditions contemporary and future choices – including seizing the momentarily redeeming possibility of having money to burn. (We have become increasingly aware of the rankling in our latest work tracing the commodity chain that brings “lamb flaps,” a cheap cut of fatty sheep meat that white people tend to feed to their pets, from Australian and New Zealand pastures to Papua New Guinean pots. While Papua New Guineans enjoy their flaps – when they can afford them – they are also aware that they are enjoying what many of them call a Western “waste product.”)²⁶

Concerning why thinking of such momentary apotheoses – such fleeting glory days – as simply bad choices limits effective responses to them: it is interesting that Diamond does not look to Papua New Guineans to be successful in solving their contemporary environmental problems. Nor does he look for restraint from the logging companies operating there. He writes: “Depending on the circumstances, a business really may maximize its profits, at least in the short term, by damaging the environment and hurting people. That is still the case

today ... for international logging companies with short-term leases on tropical rain-forest land with corrupt governmental officials and unsophisticated land owners."²⁷ The hope he does see returns us to a modern variant of the talk, talk, talk of precontact Highlanders – a modern variant of a bottom-up problem-solving that relies on an entity he calls "the public." It should be the public's role, he believes, "to reward businesses for behavior that the public wanted, and to make things difficult for businesses practicing behaviors that the public didn't want."²⁸ In relationship to logging, we in the first world, as members of the public, should, for instance, refuse to buy wood that has not been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an organization that guarantees that wood comes from companies subscribing to "sound and sustainable forest management."²⁹ We agree that such a response from members of the public would be commendable if it prevented rapacious logging practices in places such as Papua New Guinea. However, such a response would, in and of itself, leave unaddressed and, indeed, would exacerbate many of the difficult circumstances local Papua New Guineans face. As Paige West points out in her book *Conservation Is Our Government: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*, those members of the first world public who are concerned with sustainable forestry in Papua New Guinea tend to value the contribution of diverse, tropical ecosystems to the well-being of the planet and humanity in general. They tend to see Papua New Guineans as adding to the problem they wish to overcome.³⁰ It is the rainforest that needs protection from Papua New Guineans – and from their willingness to sell their forests and mountains for money. Those members of the first world public who are concerned with advancing the interests – the well-being – of Papua New Guineans in particular tend to offer them charity – the "kindness of strangers" (perhaps in the form of used books, medical supplies, and disaster relief). Either way, for the public to pressure the likes of Home Depot to eschew non-FSC certified woods obviously creates some difficulties for Papua New Guineans: they are, at least often, rendered either blameworthy or needy.

The problem we see in *Collapse* is thus comparable to the one we saw in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Both books give the have-nots a historical raw deal because neither probes context sufficiently. Certainly, neither deals in any systematic way with the relationship between

the haves and the have-nots. Whereas *Guns, Germs, and Steel* does not encourage the haves to take sufficient responsibility for the creation of the have-nots, *Collapse* does not encourage the haves to take sufficient recognition of the extent to which they benefit from the existence of the have-nots – a benefit centrally manifest in their much greater capacity to choose. For an example close to home, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, a wonderful account of the lives of the working poor in America, shows clearly how the enhanced choices of haves are reflected in the constrained choices of the have-nots.¹⁹ The latter would include the minimally paid at such stores as Home Depot, whose merchandise includes FSC-certified lumber. Thus, and somewhat perversely, that some of us have the choice of spending more for FSC-certified timber is likely a function of there being have-nots.

There is no doubt that many of the issues concerning environmental degradation are extremely important to address, and Diamond is to be greatly credited for his contribution in bringing them to the world's attention. However, to address effectively both sociohistorical inequalities and environmental degradation, it is necessary to probe, to challenge, to rethink. More specifically, it is necessary to recognize – and to help others recognize – that there is a world system busily at work, and that in this system a market-based ideology is often employed to present political and economic relationships as voluntary and fair – as choices made on an even playing field. This, despite the case that choice is often delimited and the consequences of that fact obscured. To provide an example from our recent research on a Papua New Guinean sugar plantation, it is a world system in which many forces come together to threaten the viability of one of Papua New Guinea's few nonextractive industries, a plantation that provides incomes to 18,000 people. On the one hand, first world countries such as the United States still subsidize their own sugar industries. For example, sugar producers in the United States – politically influential in Louisiana and Florida – are given favorable treatment in the form of USDA price supports, publicly supported cheap irrigation water, and protection from the likes of Cuban sugar. On the other hand, third world countries such as Papua New Guinea are strongly discouraged from subsidizing or otherwise protecting their own sugar industries. For example, Papua New Guinea's

government is heavily pressured by the World Bank and the World Trade Organization to eliminate all tariffs on imported sugar. These free-trade policies are strongly supported by such international corporate interests as those of Coca-Cola, which wishes to import cheap sugar for use in the soft drinks it sells to Papua New Guineans.³²

It is a world system in which, to provide another instance, TIAA/CREF, the pension fund of most American academics, is heavily invested in the Freeport-McMoRan copper and gold mine in Indonesia's West Papua – a mine notorious for its atrocious environmental practices and human-rights violations.³³ It is a world system in which – to refer to Diamond's analysis of the genocide in Rwanda – "the country's ... [failure] to modernize, to introduce more productive crop varieties, to expand its agricultural exports, or to institute family planning"³⁴ are "choices" clearly related to broader political and economic processes. These processes, ones that Diamond refers to either not at all or only in passing, include a colonial history, contemporary U.S. strictures on its aid going to support effective contraception, and contemporary World Bank pressures for belt-tightening structural adjustments and for growing cash crops such as coffee (for an already glutted world market) rather than subsistence crops. (See Taylor's chapter in this volume for a fuller discussion.)

It is, in other words, a world system in which choosing to act responsibly by refusing to purchase non-FSC-certified timber is laudable, probably necessary, but certainly not sufficient.

Notes

* We are respectively professor of anthropology at Trinity College (F.E.) and professor of anthropology at Amherst College (D.G.). Singly and together, we have written about the confrontations of Melanesian people with various forms of modernity. These include *Yali's Question: Sugar, Culture, and History* (2004). We are now completing a book about the flow of fatty meat from the First World to the developing world, tentatively entitled *Cheap Meat*.

First arriving when Papua New Guinea (PNG) was a de facto colony of Australia (in the late 1960s, for Fred, and early 1970s, for Deborah), we made many subsequent field trips over the past thirty-five or so years. These field trips led to projects about a range of subjects, many of them focused on change: traditional ritual as well as evangelical Christianity; clan organization as well as class formation; male initiation through

skin cutting as well as university graduation through test taking; fish for sago barter markets as well as canned mackerel and rice-purveying trade stores.

We often wondered about the frequent movement of Papua New Guineans from their villages to urban settlements and attempted to understand why they found urban life desirable despite its only marginal feasibility – despite (as we personally observed in squatter settlements) malnutrition, if not chronic hunger.

Our interests eventually led us to write a social history of Ramu Sugar Limited, a sugar plantation that was built as part of PNG's efforts to develop its economy. As we were to discover, RSL is located in a part of PNG where the political leader, Yali, had been active. And Yali's activities not only affected the lives of people we met at RSL, but played a role in Jared Diamond's book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997). In fact, Diamond frames his book as an answer to "Yali's Question": "Why is that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own." We became convinced that Diamond's answer to this question was partial, if not wrong. In this chapter, we elaborate and extend some of the reasons we have previously discussed.

1. Diamond 1997, 2005.
2. Diamond 1997: 14.
3. *Ibid.*: 93.
4. Some of the analysis below is drawn from Errington and Gewertz 2005.
5. Strathern 1992.
6. We draw in the analysis of goods and commodities from Gregory 1982.
7. Lawrence 1964: 1.
8. For more about the Karavaran cargo cult, see Errington 1974.
9. Diamond 1997: 14.
10. For an elaboration of this point, see Thomas 1991: 83–124.
11. Diamond 1997: 67–81.
12. Kelly 2000.
13. Diamond 2005: 10.
14. *Ibid.*: 15.
15. *Ibid.*: 429.
16. *Ibid.*: 285.
17. *Ibid.*: 284.
18. Brown and Buchbinder 1976.
19. Buchbinder 1973; Clarke 1971.
20. We first used the phrase "twisted history" in Gewertz and Errington 1991.
21. Diamond 2005: 472.
22. Golub 2006: 288.
23. Filer and Macintyre 2006.
24. Diamond 2005: 523–524.
25. *Ibid.*: 470–471.

26. For more about this, see Gewertz and Errington 2008.
27. Diamond 2005: 483.
28. *Ibid.*: 285.
29. *Ibid.*: 274.
30. West 2004; see also Garland 2006.
31. Ehrenreich 2001.
32. For more about this sugar plantation, see Errington and Gewertz 2005.
33. Stuart Kirsch, e-mail communication, 6 April 2007.
34. Diamond 2005: 319.

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