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## **Upheaval by Jared Diamond review — how countries can overcome crisis, and the lessons we can learn for Brexit**

*Britain could learn from this book by the author of Guns, Germs and Steel about how other nations have dealt with turmoil.*

Review by Andrew Marr

Jared Diamond is an undisputed global star of comparative history. In *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997), and then in *Collapse* (2005), he studied the success and the failure of different societies, widely scattered around the world, focusing on geography, technology and the importance of a sustainable relationship with nature. His hallmark was discovering gripping social narratives — the Greenland Norse, the people of Easter Island and New Guinea — that provided lessons for the rest of us. The odd academic quibbled, but Diamond was talked about everywhere.

Now comes *Upheaval*, about dealing with national crises, leading to global crisis. It sounds perfectly designed as advice and therapy for Britain now, but Diamond is determined not to wade into immediate controversies: so no Brexit, no Donald Trump. Indeed, this is a curious, highly personal book that might disappoint some of Diamond's greatest fans.

However, let us begin with its strengths. The first is something I initially thought a weakness. Diamond argues that personal crises, the kind grappled with by psychotherapists — the breakdown of relationships, bereavement, family and work traumas — are not so different from political crises. It sounds a little glib, but this conceit turns out to work surprisingly well.

Thus, anyone undergoing therapy for a personal crisis will be told first to acknowledge the problem, then accept responsibility for change, draw lines around the problem to be solved, accept help from others and then look for role models. The importance of striving for a sense of self, and avoiding victimhood and self-pity, are therapeutic standards. Can any of this really be applied to the politics of complex societies?

It needs translation certainly: for a nation to deal with a crisis, it must first acknowledge there is one, and try to define what it is and what it is not. The importance of strong ego is comparable to the importance of a strong national

identity. A successfully changing nation will accept responsibility for its problems, and look at other, rival societies for help. And as in personal life, so in political debate, self-pity and insistence on being the victim rarely tend to lead to healthy, successful change.

As we would hope, he finds intellectually stimulating and unusual examples that provide much food for thought. The story of modern Finland is a useful one. It underwent a nasty civil war in 1918 but was able to come together afterwards, with few recriminations and little revenge; it staved off invasion by the USSR during the Winter War of 1939-40 despite a huge imbalance of forces and a lack of international help; then, discarding false pride, managed to find a way to live with Soviet Russia on its border, while maintaining a free-market society, throughout the Cold War. It is an exemplary story of political compromise and realism, lack of self-pity and strong national character.

Another useful tale is Meiji Japan's whirlwind of modernisation after the arrival of American warships in 1853 — a period when Japanese rulers reached out for help all around the world, from the US itself, to Germany and the British Royal Navy, while carefully preserving as much that was uniquely Japanese in its culture as it could. Again, an unsentimental ledger of where a radical change was needed, and where it could be avoided safely, Meiji Japan (1868–1912) was a success from which other countries can learn.

Finally, although it has no parallel on the therapist's couch, the importance of wise and inspirational political leadership shines through. The realism of the Finnish leaders Mannerheim, Paasikivi and Kekkonen was essential to that country's story. Chancellor Willy Brandt's decision to kneel and beg forgiveness during his 1970 visit to the Warsaw ghetto symbolised a huge turn in West German policy. And the Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam's 1972 cascade of radical changes, as his country confronted the fact that it was no longer a biddable child of the British Empire, but was striking out as a multiracial Asian nation, may have been merely an acknowledgment of the obvious, but was also a pivot in Australian history.

Yet too many of the examples, which tend to have come from Diamond's own life story, don't hang together tautly enough to provide a satisfying overall thesis. The story of Indonesia coming together as a country after a communist insurgency, and the bleak tale of the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende in Chile, have only vestigial, rather obvious lessons for the rest of the world.

In other areas, Diamond is not bringing us new information as he used to. The problems of contemporary Japan, with its ageing and shrinking population and its paucity of natural resources, have been widely discussed. Diamond does at least usefully focus on the position of women. But when it comes to the United States

— and this is very much a book written for Americans — the analysis is pretty familiar.

The strengths of the US geographically, and with its long, flexible constitutional history, are sagely set against today's political polarisation, fed by partisan cable TV and social media. The lack of interest in global warming and the depletion of resources, the reliance of modern American democracy on big money, the growing fear of immigration, the use of gerrymandering and the treatment of black voters are all chastised. Rightly so. But these are problems even nonspecialist British readers know about already.

And yet, even with Britain on the edges of the narrative, there is a lot we can learn here. An honest, unsentimental profit-and-loss account of contemporary Britain would be a good place to start, as we try to think more clearly about our position during this complex Brexit argument.

As one recent opinion poll shows a worrying British enthusiasm for a strong leader “willing to break the rules”, we could also do with a revived national pride in our political traditions of compromise and moderation. We could learn from the 19th-century Japanese in looking outside ourselves for inspiration, as we think about better ways of doing politics and business. We surely must avoid maudlin self-pity and the blaming of foreigners for our own problems; and, in fact, we ought to be looking to our neighbours for the answers to some of them.

All this brutal honesty will be painful, but therapy tends to be. To make the best use of this good crisis, we first have to look at ourselves clearly in the mirror, shunning some illusions. If Diamond helps, then he's done us a great service.

**Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change by Jared Diamond**

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