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Upheaval by Jared Diamond review — no Big Idea here

This study of how nations cope with disruption is just silly, says Gerard DeGroot

Gerard DeGroot

Critics often find Jared Diamond immensely annoying. “I’ve... repeatedly been sued, threatened with lawsuits and verbally abused by scholars,” he admits. He has occasionally needed a bodyguard when lecturing. A review of one of his books ended with the command: “Shut up!”

Diamond blames this viciousness on the incivility ubiquitous in everyday life. However, since I have never seen bodyguards at a history conference, I suspect the problem might have something to do with Diamond. He’s a purveyor of the Big Idea, the grandiose theory that rides roughshod over careful research. Diligent academics do the hard graft, he gets the attention. No wonder they’re annoyed.

I have a confession to make. I once admired Diamond, the author of the bestselling *Guns, Germs & Steel*, which won a Pulitzer prize in 1998. I was impressed with his willingness to stick his head above the parapet — and *Collapse* (2005) presented intriguing explanations for why civilisations crumble. Unfortunately, his latest offering is neither intriguing nor revelatory. Instead of the Big Idea, Upheaval is the “Big So What?”

Diamond begins with a self-indulgent discussion of emotional crises, peppered with anecdotes about his travails. He then segues into crisis therapy, borrowing heavily from his wife, Marie, a clinical psychologist. Therapists, he claims, have identified 12 factors that determine an individual’s ability to resolve a personal crisis. Things such as ego strength, acknowledgment of a problem, acceptance of responsibility, willingness to seek help, flexibility etc.

Diamond then makes one of those bold leaps of reason for which he is famous. He shoehorns individual crisis theory into an examination of how nations deal with crises. The problem is that, while individuals can learn to cope, nations are much more unyielding. A nation cannot sit on a psychiatrist’s couch or take Valium. Yet Diamond claims that his motive in Upheaval is to offer the world “guidance in our search for solutions” — in other words, a self-help manual for nations. He insists that “[we] have the option of learning from history, if we so choose”.

That might be true, but the history in question needs to be relevant, well researched and judiciously analysed. Unfortunately, Upheaval is decidedly amateur history — shallow research, facile analysis, simplistic assumptions. Diamond examines six nations in crisis: Finland under

Soviet domination, Meiji Japan, Chile after Pinochet, Indonesia after Suharto, post-1945 Germany and 20th-century Australia.

“My sample,” he admits, “is not only small, but also selected non-randomly.” Missing are any African countries, any impoverished ones, or any torn by nationalist civil war. Thus, no Rwanda, Serbia or Lebanon. Why these six? These are “countries that I know best”, he explains. They’re places he has lived or visited frequently. This leads to a lot of anecdotal history. The narrative is peppered with sentences such as: “That conclusion was confirmed... by a Chilean friend who knew a fireman...”

What results is quite shockingly ignorant and naive. Diamond’s assessment of Cold War rivalries reads like prejudice formed by an American in 1962 and never reassessed. He misunderstands how the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 affected the development of Australian national identity. His discussion of political turbulence in 1960s Germany ignores the influence of Rudi Dutschke and his Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, young people who asked difficult questions about the Nazi past.

Diamond’s analysis of Chile is especially shallow. “[Salvador] Allende’s policies were based on unrealistic appraisals,” he argues. What exactly does that mean, and what are we supposed to learn? He rightly attributes the 1973 coup that toppled Allende to Chileans, not to the CIA, but fails to understand how Americans were enablers for Augusto Pinochet. Diamond’s assessment of Pinochet’s cruelty seems particularly naive. His regime arrested 130,000 Chileans (1 per cent of the population), many of whom were sadistically tortured. Diamond struggles to explain that barbarity. “I haven’t heard any plausible explanation for the sadism.” Really, Jared, you’re surprised? What about Hitler, Mao, Saddam, Stalin or Gaddafi? Isn’t this how dictators behave?

Granted, Diamond’s little stories are occasionally fascinating. For instance, he relates how, in March 1940 the Soviets annexed the province of Karelia, in which 10 per cent of the Finnish population lived. The Finns responded by evacuating everyone and moving them elsewhere. Their hopelessly unequal war with the Soviets attracted considerable sympathy abroad, but they were still technically an enemy of the Allies. That being the case, they were forced to try their heroic leaders as war criminals after 1945. After serving their sentence, those leaders were quietly voted back into high office.

A similar level of pragmatism characterised the Japanese during the Meiji restoration. After their humiliation when Commodore Matthew Perry forced his warships into Tokyo Bay in 1853, Japanese statesmen decided on a comprehensive programme of imitation to compete with the West. The constitution was rewritten, feudalism ended, education reformed and banking restructured. Virtually overnight the Japanese changed the way they dressed and combed their hair to become more western. The emperor even agreed to a western-style wedding with just one wife — previous emperors had proudly flaunted their many concubines.

Missing from these stories, however, is a clear evaluation of their relevance and wider applicability. Diamond also blithely ignores contradiction. For instance, strong national identity (factor six) militates against flexibility (factor ten) and imitation (factor five). These contradictions are revealed in how The New York Times in 1979 superciliously described

Finland's strategy of coping with its neighbour, the Soviet Union, as "a deplorable state of affairs in which a small and weak neighbor, awed by the might and political ruthlessness of a totalitarian superpower, makes shameless and embarrassing concessions of its sovereign liberties". One nation's pragmatism is another's appeasement.

Diamond moves confidently from superficial histories to painfully thin prescriptions. Take for instance: "Small countries threatened by large countries should remain alert, consider alternative options and appraise those options realistically." Again, problems arise from those confusing, contradictory factors. Seeking help (factor four) "has played either a positive role or a negative role in the resolution of... crises". National core values (factor 11) "can make it easier or harder... to adopt selective change". Diamond's advice is as useful as an umbrella in a hurricane.

In the end the primary purpose of this book is to offer Americans help with their present crisis, which Diamond considers the worst in his nation's history. He is probably right about that, but what are his fellow citizens supposed to do with his conclusion that "only we Americans can destroy ourselves"?

No one has ever accused Diamond of being humble. Upheaval, he boasts, "is a book expected to remain in print for many decades". He likes to think he's a pioneer. "This book has been an initial step in a program of comparative studies of national crises." That's cobblers. Upheaval is neither illuminating nor groundbreaking. Diligent scholars, including Paul Kennedy, Daron Acemoglu and Francis Fukuyama, have been ploughing this furrow for years. After reading this book, I now understand why Diamond sometimes needs a bodyguard.

Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change by Jared Diamond, Allen Lane, 500pp, £25