

makes another attempt at interpreting the history of Easter Island (Rapa Nui). Does it provide evidence of the fecklessness of humanity in destroying their life-support system, as Diamond and others have suggested in the past, or are there mitigating circumstances in the story? The fact is that when the islanders first arrived at their new home, tiny and remote in the southeast Pacific, they probably could not believe their luck. By chance they had discovered a temperate, forested, well-watered place, covered by volcanic soils of high inherent fertility. Not only was the island agriculture-friendly, it was also surrounded by an ocean populated by big meals in the shape of large marine mammals. The good life beckoned and over a few hundred years the Easter Islanders built a stable, complex, civilized society. But when the first Europeans arrived in the eighteenth century they found an impoverished people, no longer with the resources to build boats sturdy enough to hunt at sea, living on an island covered mostly by grasses, sedges and ferns. The big trees were gone and unprotected soil was being washed or blown into the sea. The only big meals left were themselves, and they lapsed into cannibalism.

What were they thinking, asked Diamond in an article in *Discover Magazine* (08/01/95), as they cut down the last tree? Since he first asked that rhetorical question, with its implication that the Islanders were none too smart, he has nuanced his response with a possible nod to political correctness. The answer he gives in Chapter 4 is essentially a repeat of Chapter 2 of *Collapse*: the Easter Islanders had “the bad luck to find themselves living on one of the Pacific’s most environmentally fragile islands.”

In wondering what topics a similar book on the earth sciences might include, I immediately thought of Steven J. Gould’s speculation of what might happen if we could reel the tape of the geological VCR back to the Cambrian explosion and let it run forward a second time. He believed that chance would deliver a different outcome from our present world, and that there was no guarantee that intelligence would be part of the result. However, there is no natural experi-

ment by which we can test his idea unless we can find for comparison a number of accessible earth-like planets with biospheres. But a similar speculation, first made by the anthropologist Marvin Harris, is testable. Let us reel the tape back a mere 15 000 years to a time when *Homo sapiens* was still hunting, gathering, scavenging and burning its way through a pre-agricultural Old World. Would a re-run still produce the Neolithic Revolution – the invention of farming based on domesticated animals and crops? And would it lead to political, military and religious elites, cities with monumental architecture and roads, skilled trades and a division of labour? It did. As Ronald Wright

points out in *A Short History of Progress*, when the Conquistadores arrived in Mexico, they recognized that what they saw was an agriculture-based civilization.

I leave the last word to Acemoglu and co-workers in Chapter 7 of *Natural Experiments of History*. “History is full of [natural experiments]; it is just that historians have not yet thought of them in these terms. We believe that exploiting these experiments in a systematic way will greatly improve our understanding of the important forces that have driven long-run processes of historical, social, political, and economic change (p. 249–250).”

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