

***Upheaval* review: How countries seldom learn from their past**

Jared Diamond examines whether nations can find lessons during crises in way people do

Ian Hughes

With Donald Trump and Brexit mounting their daily assault on our senses, we could be forgiven for thinking that the world is having a nervous breakdown. Many readers will turn, therefore, to Jared Diamond's new book *Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change* in the hope that it might ease our anxieties by showing us how countries have successfully navigated major upheavals in the past. Diamond promises to do so by asking if the ways in which individuals learn to cope with personal trauma can be applied to nations as well. The stark conclusion that emerges from his book, however, is that while individuals often learn from crisis, countries seldom do.

Diamond applies his framework for how individuals cope with crisis to trace how a range of countries have survived defining catastrophes. The nations considered are Finland, Japan, Chile, Indonesia, Germany, Australia and the US. His descriptions of each of these crises are revealing. Two examples, Australia and the US, will suffice to give a flavour of his analysis.

Australia stands out as an example of a country that has learned from crisis and in doing so has changed its core identity and adapted progressively to monumental external changes. Specifically, Diamond looks at how that country's identity adapted, over a period of decades, as Australia's long-held belief of being an all-white nation gradually became unsustainable. The changing context included changing global values and the phenomenal economic development of Australia's east Asian neighbours. As Diamond explains, it was untenable that, at the same time as Australia was telling Japan and other Asian countries how eager it was for trade, it was also telling them that it considered Japanese and other Asian people themselves unfit to settle in Australia. By changing this aspect of its core identity, Australia has adapted to become one of the most multicultural countries in the world.

The section on the US stands, in stark contrast, as an example of a country in which a crisis is getting worse. In perhaps the most fascinating section of the book, Diamond identifies the accelerating deterioration of compromise, not only in the political sphere but in all areas of life, as the most ominous problem threatening American society today. Diamond argues that intolerance and abusiveness have increased markedly in everyday life as the rise of narcissism and the decline of civility loosen the bonds that hold society together. Instead of accepting responsibility and trying to understand why this might be so, too many Americans have retreated into self-righteous certainty and blame their problems on others, including Mexico, China and illegal immigrants.

The inability of the US to face up to its current crisis reflects the major theme that emerges from *Upheaval*. What stands out in most cases is not how nations cope with crisis and change, but rather how they studiously avoid doing so.

In four of the countries Diamond considers, Japan, Chile, Indonesia and Germany, governments committed large scale crimes against humanity, crimes that for most of the nations concerned are still simply too disturbing to acknowledge. Diamond's analysis of Japan is a case in point. Following the forced ending of Japan's isolation from the West by US warships in 1853, Japan adopted a strategy of selective change.

This strategy included building its military strength so that it could fight back against the foreign presence while retaining its belief in its people as being unique, superior and ruled by a divine emperor. These selective changes would later, of course, have devastating consequences for the victims of Japanese aggression in the second World War. Today, Japan's inability to fully accept responsibility for its wartime atrocities in China, Korea and elsewhere, continues to detrimentally affect its relationships with its neighbours.

That same inability to face up to a difficult past is also broadly true in Chile and Indonesia. In Chile under Augusto Pinochet, more than 130,000 Chileans were arrested, while thousands were tortured and disappeared. In Indonesia under Suharto, a military-led slaughter resulted in the mass murder of an estimated half a million people, in one of the world's largest episodes of mass murder since the second World War. Today, Indonesian schoolchildren are taught little about the mass killings of 1965, while many older Chileans still hold Pinochet in high esteem for having been a "strong leader".

However, Diamond's chapter on Germany illustrates just how exceptional Germany has been in fully accepting responsibility for the evil it conducted in the past and for recognising clearly the danger that such evil can easily re-emerge. It might not have been so. Following the war, despite the Nuremberg trials at which the allies prosecuted top surviving Nazi leaders, many Germans continued to believe that Nazi crimes were the fault of just a small number of evil individual leaders and that the vast majority of Germans were innocent.

Change in this widely held view came only decades after the war ended, thanks largely to one man, the German Jewish lawyer and Social Democrat Fritz Bauer. He prosecuted low-level Germans who had been active at Auschwitz, low-level Nazi police, low-level German judges who had sentenced German resistance leaders and Jews, doctors who had participated in Nazi euthanasia, and rank-and-file German soldiers who had participated in atrocities, particularly on the eastern front.

Bauer demonstrated that Nazi atrocities were not the work of just a few bad leaders, but that masses of ordinary Germans had been guilty of crimes against humanity. To paraphrase former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, Bauer forced Germany to face up to its past and rid itself of the poison in its system.

Diamond closes *Upheaval* with the reflection that we have the option of learning from history if we so choose. Rather than easing our anxieties over the current global malaise, however, Diamond's book serves as a warning that a return of the ghosts of history can be a very real consequence of our collective refusal to learn.

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