

Geography Lessons

To the Editor:

Gregg Easterbrook's essay on two books by Jared Diamond (Jan. 30), "Collapse" and the earlier "Guns, Germs, and Steel," is a crafty bit of rhetoric. He begins by lavishing praise on Diamond's "magnificent books: extraordinary in erudition and originality. . . . I read both thinking what literature might be like if every author knew so much, wrote so clearly and formed arguments with such care." Wow. But in spite of his brilliance, Diamond's conclusions are (darn it) "probably wrong." This is going to be interesting! What powerful objections is our reviewer going to pose against the mighty edifice he esteems so highly? None, it turns out. Instead, he plays a variation on the old Steve Gould two-step: first you caricature the view you dislike (but can't think of any arguments against); then you yourself draw attention to evidence that contradicts your caricature — but claim that it is evidence of the author contradicting himself! A cute trick, but intellectually dishonest.

Here's the caricature of "Guns": "Diamond contends it was chance, not culture or brainpower, that brought industrial power first to Europe; Western civilization has nothing to boast about." Nonsense. Diamond argues that it was chance — geographical luck — that gave Western civilization its head start, so that it could sooner develop the culture, both material and intellectual, that did indeed amplify the initial lucky advantage. The cultural differences grew out of the geographical differences. And now here's the evidence that contradicts Easterbrook's caricature: he cites Diamond's explanation of why China fell behind, and notes that according to Diamond it was a cultural phenomenon — China's autocratic system of rule — that was mainly responsible. Does this show a self-contradictory Diamond, or a misrepresenting Easterbrook? It's obvious that Diamond has all along argued a more subtle position, knowing full well that specific geographical conditions may be necessary but not sufficient for various cultural conditions, and appreciating the importance of cultural differences. Otherwise, you would have to think Diamond incredibly myopic, not noticing that his carefully argued cultural explanation of China's stagnation was contradicting what Easter-

brook calls his "single-explanation theory," encapsulated as follows: "Supply the right environmental conditions, and inevitably there will be a factory manufacturing jet engines." Easterbrook calls Diamond's theory "a drastic oversimplification," but in "Collapse" (for example, on Page 22) Diamond explicitly disavows this interpretation: it is Easterbrook's drastic oversimplification, and it must be deliberate.

When Easterbrook turns to the new book, he again lavishes praise, and in fact concedes almost all its claims. ("Diamond rightly warns of alarming trends in biodiversity, soil loss, freshwater limits . . . overfishing . . . and climate change. . . . These and other trends may lead to a global crash.") So what are the "flaws" and what is Diamond "probably wrong" about? Whereas Diamond says "a large fraction" of the world's species may fall extinct in the next 50 years, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimates this fraction at about 9 percent. "That's plenty bad enough," Easterbrook concedes, "but does not support the idea that a 'large fraction' of species are poised to vanish." O.K., it's good to know that 9 percent isn't large.

Then there's the fact that Diamond mainly looks at island populations. "Like most species, most people do not live on islands, yet 'Collapse' tries to generalize from environmental failures on isolated islands to environmental threats to society as a whole." Diamond's attempt is ambitious and risky, but are his conclusions wrong? Easterbrook gives no arguments, but does offer us an alternative: we don't have to think of our planet as a sort of island; we can move! "If the phase of fossil-driven technology leads to discoveries that allow *Homo sapiens* to move into the galaxy, then resources, population pressure and other issues that worry Diamond will be forgotten." Sweet! (But probably wrong.) Not to worry, though: maybe the Hale-Bopp comet will come back to the planet we've spoiled and take us off to some better place. How shortsighted of Diamond not to have foreseen these solutions to the problems he so brilliantly raises!

A book as important as "Collapse" by a scientist as eminent as Diamond deserves a reviewer who has some professional knowledge about the topic.

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Gregg Easterbrook replies:

Daniel Dennett contends I caricature the books in question: I urge any fair-minded person to read the books and the essay and be the judge. He asserts I present no counterarguments; I urge readers to read the essay and its counterarguments for themselves. Now, perhaps Dennett did not like my counterarguments, but that is another matter — he should simply say he disagrees, rather than go directly to impugning my character. Dennett states that only someone with "professional knowledge" of the books' primary topic, geography, should review them. Yet Dennett himself, a professor of philosophy, has written widely on subjects about which he is not a specialist. If only specialists could write about their specialties, literature would be dry indeed: and no one should compose a letter to the editor, unless having "professional" knowledge of the newspaper business. Finally, I fail to see what Stephen Jay Gould, unmentioned either in the books or in my essay, has to do with this, other than that Dennett has a long history of denouncing Gould. Stephen Jay Gould died in 2002; perhaps it is time Dennett allowed him to rest.

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