

Vision through a Narrow Lens

by

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VISION THROUGH A NARROW LENS

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As a writer and scientist, Jared Diamond is much admired, and rightly so. His leading accomplishment, showcased in his Pulitzer-Prize winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, was to re-introduce the role of geographic and environmental factors to the story of how the world's civilizations developed. Diamond came up with non-controversial factors that explained, without belittling any group or region, why Eurasia had a head start in the path toward civilization. The chief factors were the east-west transportation axis of Eurasia and the availability of plants and animals that were easily domesticated.

Leafing through Diamond's most recent book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, one expects a similar well-founded scholarship. And to a limited extent, the book does provide that. Diamond does begin to untangle some of the fascinating puzzles about the disappearance of distant civilizations, applying knowledge and insight to the mysterious Anasazi, the Norse in Greenland, the ancient Mayans, fabled Easter Island, and others. Just collecting what is known about these societies is a service.

Yet describing environmental factors such as deforestation and soil erosion that contributed to those collapses is not enough for Diamond. He wants to divine the causes of the collapses. And although he stresses environmental forces, he recognizes that the causes are deeper, having to do with institutional rules and collective action issues. The trouble is – as other contributors to this journal attest – he doesn't know much about these issues.

Even worse, he balances on his fragile pedestal of knowledge some massive assertions about the world today. He believes that his fragmentary explanations of why small groups such as the Anasazi or the Easter Islanders disappeared can form the basis for predictions about the future of the state of Montana or the continent of Australia.

Why does this typically erudite scholar, known for a congenial writing style that wins over skeptics and offends no one, discard the humility that is the hallmark of the scientific method?

To some extent, the cause may be the company he keeps. Paul Ehrlich, a noted environmental pessimist, is one of the six people Diamond acknowledges for reading the entire manuscript, and Ehrlich's work is frequently cited – and defended. Other sources for Diamond's comments on modern environmental threats include

works by Lester Brown (three books by Brown, in fact), J. Gustave Speth, and Stuart Pimm – all writers who emphasize environmental threats and assume future deterioration of environmental quality.

Diamond ignores or dismisses criticisms of the pessimistic viewpoint. In a section in Chapter 16 called “One-liner Objections,” he reduces optimistic arguments to a series of simple statements (such as “Technology will solve our problems”) to which he responds, citing the likes of Ehrlich.

Although he concedes that the one-liners do have supporters, he refers his readers to only one: Bjorn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. After this mere mention, apparently to drown out any influence from Lomborg, he recommends four additional sources, whose authors include Paul and Anne Ehrlich and Donella Mathews and her colleagues (who authored the apocalyptic *Limits to Growth* and the *Limits to Growth: The Thirty-Year Update*).

In other words, in a “Further Readings” chapter that lists more than 300 recommended sources, Diamond suggests only one book to see “the other side” – and quickly adds four additional sources to counter the effects of that one book. (By the way, he provides a source, Pierre Crosson, who downplays the significance of erosion today – but that is the only dissenting voice I saw on an environmental issue.)

Not surprisingly, Diamond disputes any suggestion that population growth may not be a major environmental problem today. What is surprising is that he crosses over the line of civility by depreciating the work of the late Julian Simon, who is best known for his optimism about population growth. I want to elaborate on this discussion, both because Simon is not here to defend himself – and also because Diamond’s comments reveal the narrow lens through which he looks at environmental issues.

Simon has written or edited at least ten weighty books, and numerous journal articles, on population and environmental topics. Two of his most famous books include *The Ultimate Resource* (1981) and *The Ultimate Resource 2* (1996), both of which sought to analyze claims made by the environmental movement with empirical data.

However, Diamond feels that he can dispose of Simon’s views in two paragraphs. Without even giving a source for the statement, Diamond ridicules Simon as saying “Copper can be made from other elements”. Diamond then pedantically explains to the reader, “We learn in our first course of chemistry that copper is an element, which means that by definition it cannot be made from other elements” (510).

Yet Simon’s statement hardly touches on the economist’s extensive contributions to understanding resource issues. The quote in fact appears to be a paraphrase of a line from a whimsical pseudo-Socratic dialogue in Simon’s book *The Ultimate Resource*. The dialogue (called “Afterword 1”) features “Happy Writer” trying to persuade “Peers Strawman” that the physical finiteness of resources is not relevant to human experience. He says: “How about if we can use energy from outside the earth—from the sun, say—to create additional copper the way we grow plants and solar energy?” Happy Writer then says this is “physically possible” and “likely to be feasible in the future” (Simon 1981, 52). Then, however, he moves to discussions of scarcity, recycling, and substitutes.

Diamond alludes to another rhetorical flourish of Simon’s – that there will be enough food for people for 7 billion years – but I have not found its source, and

Diamond gives none. He disparages Simon further (509–510) when he mentions the famous bet between Ehrlich and Simon over whether the prices of certain minerals (selected by Ehrlich) would increase or fall in ten years. Simon won the bet because the minerals went down in value, not up. Diamond points out that Ehrlich was not alone in his misjudgment (he joined with John Harte and John Holdren), but he does not inform the reader that Simon was the person on the other side!

Why did Diamond come under the influence of Ehrlich and other doomsday environmentalists? On the leading environmental issue of the day, global warming, why did he not adopt the skepticism espoused by scientists such as climatologist Richard Lindzen or astrophysicist Robert Jastrow?

The answer is probably simple: Apocalyptic environmentalism (which is a fair description of his position, although he presents it in subdued tones) has achieved the moral high ground on environmental issues. Anyone who minimizes environmental problems, or suggests that they can be solved without political coercion, is pretty much off Diamond's radarscope. I am confident that Diamond would be willing to challenge the consensus view if he was actually a non-partisan observer. He simply has not examined the non-apocalyptic position in *Collapse*.

Diamond avoids scrutinizing these issues from a variety of perspectives because apocalypse has such prestige, thanks in large part to the support of some scientists. Although the leading scientific journals, *Science* and *Nature*, do not always preach doomsday environmental views, they have made global warming their *cause célèbre*. This comes through in their editorials (especially in *Nature*), and a recent flap in the British press suggests that this enthusiasm may be influencing its peer review process as well.

In December 2004, Naomi Oreskes concluded in a *Science* article, based on a review of 928 papers, that 75 per cent of the papers shared the "consensus" view of global warming. But Benny Peiser of Liverpool John Moores University told the *Daily Telegraph* (May 1, 2005) that his critique of Oreskes' study – when he conducted a review of the same papers and came to a much different conclusion – had been turned down by *Science*. [Editor's note: See Peiser's correspondence with *Science*, this journal.]

Roy Spencer of the University of Alabama, a scientist known for his satellite measurements of temperature, told the *Telegraph* that after his group's views on global warming became known, he and his group were no longer sent papers from *Science* and *Nature* for review.

Scientists are reaping a funding bonanza as a result of public concern about global warming and other environmental threats. Some years ago, when the dangers of chlorofluorocarbons to the ozone layer were being debated, Melvyn Shapiro, who was director of a research laboratory for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, remarked to a magazine writer that funding was spurring much of the research.

Shapiro said candidly, "When you say the ozone threat is a scam, you're not only attacking people's scientific integrity, you're going after their pocketbook as well. It's money, purely money." Soon after the article appeared, another reporter, Ronald Bailey, attempted to talk with him, but learned that he was not accepting calls from the press. Any more talk of that kind might have jeopardized funding for ozone research (Bailey, 1993, 120).

Indeed, today's coalition of scientists and environmental groups can be viewed as an example of the "bootleggers and Baptists" theory developed by economist Bruce Yandle. The theory states that strong political coalitions can be created, often inadvertently, by people with divergent motivations. In the southern United States, for example, Baptists and other conservative Christians have often opposed the sale of liquor on Sunday. Their campaign against Sunday liquor sales is the public face of this position. Bootleggers – those who produce liquor illegally – are on the opposite side morally, but they have the same goal because demand for their product will increase if liquor sales are illegal. Although the interests of Baptists and bootleggers are different, the goal – banning sales on Sunday – is the same (see Yandle, 1983).

Environmental activists often act as the Baptists in political issues. An environmental group supports national appliance energy standards on the grounds that Americans are too wasteful of energy. Behind the scenes, major appliance companies ("bootleggers") may seek the same standards because they will reduce competition. In just this way, the outcry of environmentalists over global warming gives scientists cover to push for more research funds to address the scientific issues.

One person who sees this alliance quite clearly is the novelist Michael Crichton. His recent book *State of Fear* (2004) is, like some of his other fiction, highly improbable. But it deals with global warming, and Crichton includes as an appendix to the book a serious comparison of today's "consensus" over global warming with the enthusiasm for eugenics in the early twentieth century.

Eugenics is the science of improving the quality of a species or a race through inheritance. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it became enmeshed with political goals of sterilizing or isolating people who were considered feeble-minded or otherwise unfit. Well-known people were comfortable with such goals: Crichton lists Theodore Roosevelt, Margaret Sanger and others in this camp, although today past affiliations with eugenics are deliberately downplayed or neglected.

"I am not arguing that global warming is the same as eugenics," Crichton writes. "But the similarities are not superficial." As with eugenics, he sees prestigious figures around the world, financially supported by foundations, acclaiming a crisis as if with one voice, dealing harshly with critics, relying on "claims of moral superiority," and pushing for legislation "with little basis in fact or science."

The saddest fact is that it took the extreme abuses by the Nazi regime in Germany to end support of eugenics by the elites in this country. Crichton points out that as late as 1939 the Rockefeller Foundation was funding German eugenics researchers, even though the state was gassing people in mental institutions (Crichton, 577). If Crichton is right about this analogy, terrible harm may have to occur before scientists and environmentalists come to their senses on global warming and other doomsday predictions.

Meanwhile, Diamond apparently sees nothing wrong with predicting disaster on the basis of strands of environmental history and superficial guesses as to how political action might change these predictions. This overconfidence, coupled with his disdain for critics of the apocalyptic view, Diamond, has created a book that seems out of touch with reality. Although at the moment the pessimists are riding high, their views frequently exaggerate the nature of the threat and ultimately, Diamond's tremendous

prestige is likely to be weakened by his one-sided view. It's a shame, but it's a sign of the times.

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