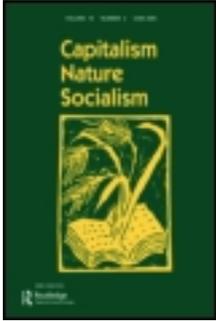


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EDITORIAL

F**k Jared Diamond

David Correia

Jared Diamond is back at it, once again trading in the familiar determinist tropes that earned him a Pulitzer Prize for his 1999 book *Guns, Germs and Steel*. That dull book was chockfull of the bad and the worse, the random and the racist. At best it is just silly, as when he offers unsupported, and unsupportable, assertions such as his get-off-my-lawn grouse that children today are not as smart as in the recent past and television is to blame. At worst, it develops an argument about human inequality based on a determinist logic that reduces social relations such as poverty, state violence, and persistent social domination, to inexorable outcomes of geography and environment.

Arguments such as these have made him a darling of bourgeois intellectuals, who have grown tired of looking meanspirited and self-serving when they make their transparently desperate efforts to displace histories of imperialism back on its victims. They need a pseudointellectual explanation for inequality in order to sustain the bourgeois social order that guarantees their privilege. This they found in *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

His crime spree continues with 2012's *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*, which takes its readers on a racist tour from the primitive to the modern. Give him credit, he may be a hack but he is a clever hack. And he knows how to make himself useful. He disguises the racism of his biological and environmental determinism in a Kiplingesque narrative that seems downright thoughtful and caring. They—those primitives—have so much to teach us moderns. We have an obligation, a burden you might say, that comes to us ordained by a divine accident of geography and environment, and so we must, with humility (and sometimes bombs), cultivate that exceptionalism. And, of course, the subtext here is that our exceptionalism is not a thing, but a relation; it cannot exist without their primitivism. These are not categories but relations biological and environmental in nature.

Everything Diamond does is motivated by an environmental determinism that takes the physical environment, including the climate, to be a determinant on human society. Diamond and his partners in crime, such as Jeffrey Sachs, argue that we can look to patterns of environmental change or geographical difference as a way to

understand trajectories of human and social development and, by so doing, explain why some societies flourish while others languish in poverty or even collapse.

Diamond won a Pulitzer Prize because he made this ridiculous, racist argument sound like common sense. His books do not merely sanitize a history of colonial violence; they are its disinfectant. They offer compelling and seemingly intuitive arguments that serve as the “ideology of an imperial capitalism,” as geographer Dick Peet called it.

But before we give Diamond too much credit, we should remember that he is just an opportunist. Environmental determinism plagued academic disciplines such as anthropology, economics, and geography in the 19th and early 20th centuries—well before Diamond got rich from it. It was influential then as now because according to the late geographer Neil Smith, it “had an obvious appeal as a kind of royal shortcut to human science,” and, he could have added, that royal shortcut offered a fast track to professional success. Its adherents were the willing tools of empire and happily explained away the poverty and misery (and privileges) of imperialism as a function of natural processes. Cold northern climates produce hardy and thrifty people who thus flourish. Meanwhile, the unrelenting heat along the equator produces lazy people condemned to forever languish in patterns of poverty as predictable as the trade winds.

The theory lost its luster in the early to mid-20th century. Decolonization scholars, in particular, launched attack after attack. The intellectual backlash focused on geography, the discipline most closely associated with an environmental determinism. Ivy League institutions in particular, embarrassed by such obvious associations with imperialism (they prefer their associations to be less transparent), dropped geography departments *en masse*. Chastened, the discipline backedpeddled, ashamed by its own enthusiastic service to imperialism.

The embarrassment meant that environmental determinism was largely ignored rather than buried; zombie-like, Diamond brought it back from the dead. And he was not alone. Jeffrey Sachs too, while an economist at Harvard, repackaged old-fashioned environmental determinism as the “ecology of underdevelopment.” Here’s Sachs in a 1999 article in *The Economist*:

If it were true that the poor were just like the rich but with less money,” he wrote, “the global situation would be vastly easier than it is. As it happens, the poor live in different ecological zones, face different health conditions and must overcome agronomic limitations that are very different from those of rich countries. Those differences, indeed, are often a fundamental cause of persisting poverty.

Unlike Diamond, Sachs is not content to just pontificate. If there was a field guide to environmental determinists in the wild, it would not picture the domesticated Diamond, but rather Sachs, holding a copy of *Guns, Germs and Steel* in one hand and embracing U2’s Bono with the other. While Diamond provides the intellectual

ammunition, it is Sachs who fires the big guns. He remains today a key advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, and is enormously influential in policy and diplomatic circles. And he owes it all to his embrace of an environmental determinist argument that miraculously resolves capitalism's contradictions. The redistribution of wealth will not resolve the global inequality. Why not? Because the geographical and unequal distribution of affluence and poverty is not a result of unequal power relations but rather is a function of complex geographic and climatic dynamics that has nothing whatsoever to do with histories of colonial conquest and capitalist expansion.

Karl Marx anticipated Sachs. "In times long gone-by," he wrote in *Capital*, Volume 1 in a brilliant parody of determinist apoloia, "there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living... Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labor, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work."

For Marx, the unequal distribution of wealth was historically created in ruthless patterns of capitalist accumulation. And, as the quote above so sarcastically implies, the social relations that sustain this inequality require elaborate and renewable ideologies that can explain away plunder as the work of nature. And so we get people like Diamond and Sachs, who give us "the poor" as an ecological category. In their world, the poor were always bound to be poor while the rich were bound to be rich.

And these arguments are all about making sure that it remains their world. In *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Diamond argued that we should ignore histories of colonialism if we really want to understand "the Fates of Societies," (his subtitle for the book). We must focus on physical geography and on climate if we want to understand why the world is divided into rich and poor. Europe's ability to subjugate and colonize Africa was merely an accident owing to "geography and biogeography—in particular to the continent's different areas, axes, and suites of wild plant and animal species. This is, the different historical trajectories of Africa and Europe stem ultimately from differences in real estate" (401).

Diamond's glib reduction of the history of violent colonialism to mere "real estate" is meant to draw the reader's attention away from history and toward nature, but to the critical reader the reference does the opposite. Real estate is an object of value only because it exists as a private property. And private property is a social relation enforced by the capitalist state, a state organized to reinforce unequal social relations, forever enforcing the unequal distribution of resources, in order to preserve class division.

In a scathing review in the journal, *Antipode* in 2003, a host of prominent human geographers pilloried Diamond's work. Andrew Sluyter called it "junk

science.” Paul Robbins, more kind than Sluyter, chided Diamond for harnessing “a thoughtful and fascinating body of evidence to an explanatory dead horse.” But Robbins was just being clever. He knew full well that you cannot beat a dead horse. Academics attacked arguments such as those by Sachs and Diamond because the cruel logic of environmental determinism is, unfortunately, anything but dead. And, in a troubling development, it has found purchase recently among climate change scientists.

More than anything, Diamond and Sachs have reestablished the scientific bona fides of environmental determinism, which is being aggressively taken up as an explanatory framework among historical climate change scientists. This new “scientific” version of climate determinism took center stage at the 2012 American Geophysical Union in San Francisco. There, researchers from West Virginia University described the results of a recent tree ring data from Asia in which, they argued, a particularly wet period in the 13th century corresponded to the rise of Ghengis Khan and the spread of the Mongols. According to researchers, wet conditions would have been particularly advantageous to nomadic Mongol herders.

Well, maybe, but like for most of Diamond’s assertions, there are any number of explanations. It is more than likely that the rise of the Mongols had something to do with the enormous size of Khan’s army.

But, apparently, the past is littered with the wreckage of history’s climate victims. A host of recent studies have linked civilization collapse in Asia, South America, and Africa to climate change. Just as in the past, we would best tread carefully around such arguments. Collapse and climate may indeed be linked, but these efforts, as with Diamond, ignore patterns of social response to climate change and how these political and social struggles over resources produced uneven patterns of development and inequality.

For starters, there may be a more useful correspondence than climate and collapse to consider: the prevalence of claims by climate scientists of a link between climate and the collapse of past civilizations corresponds to the return of environmental determinist explanation in the mid-1990s. In 1995, around the same time that Diamond found success peddling his determinist snake oil, researchers reported in the prestigious journal, *Nature* that population growth and drought was a likely cause of the demise of the Maya civilization. This work kicked off a cottage industry among climate scientists who suddenly found climate/collapse correspondences everywhere they looked: Mesopotamia, West Asia, Egypt, and the Maghreb.

This recent raft of historical climate collapse stories is troubling for a number of reasons. First, what many of these studies refer to as “collapse” is in fact a slow population decline over a period of, often, hundreds of years. The “collapse” of the Maya occurred, for example, between 750 AD and 900 AD: hundreds of years

of decline (what scientists mean by “decline,” by the way, is rarely defined in the scientific literature) that overlaps with a period of climate change. “Climate change,” like “collapse,” is likewise frequently ill-defined; often, these “abrupt” shifts in temperature and precipitation are, in fact, changes that occur over hundreds of years and millions of square miles. In the case of the Maya, the period of dramatic climate change occurred during a two-hundred-year period between 800 AD and 1000 AD—a period that marked the driest in the middle Holocene.

In addition, it should be noted that the increase in historical climate collapse research corresponds to the popularization of the wide acceptance of contemporary anthropogenic climate change research. Whether researchers are explicit about this or not, the rationale for historical work on the link between climate and collapse, particularly among funding agencies and the general public, has everything to do with the current climate crisis. These are the “what’s-in-store-for-us” stories that many peddle in the hope that it may galvanize a broad-based movement to interrupt current patterns of global greenhouse gas emissions.

This is a troubling development. Environmental determinism is not critical environmental politics; it is a bourgeois social theory. It cannot be the wellspring for a radical movement to address the social and environmental injustices of climate change. It serves only to sustain capitalist social relations. We should consider, therefore, what kind of contemporary climate politics this rhetoric of collapse promises to engender. There is, no doubt, a real urgency to the problem posed by climate change. The climate is indeed changing and transforming in ways not conducive to human or nonhuman life. The idea of a climate catastrophism, however, so prevalent in the rhetoric (disguised as science) of historical climate change research, displaces and defers this urgency. If our fate is apocalypse, after all, what good is grassroots organizing? Moreover, the false panic of an apocalyptic rhetoric provides the rationale for ignoring the suffering of the marginalized and the disenfranchised. When we strip away the apocalyptic rhetoric, we can see that we are not all in this together. But the apocalyptic rhetoric forecloses the possibility of radical democratic politics because it makes any politics at all impossible. It is because it is bourgeois social theory that it offers solutions only to the problems that come with the work of sustaining capitalist social relations. So the solutions proposed are not surprising: we should entrust our futures to a nondemocratic techno-managerial elite, to the apparatuses of the bureaucracies of the capitalist state, to the military, and even to the corporations who profit from climate catastrophism.

But there may be hope still. Environmental determinism may yet get its overdue and proper burial. Columnist David Brooks reviewed Diamond’s recent book in the reactionary pages of *The New York Times*, which is really no different from Diamond’s writing a review of his own book, but his shell game no longer mesmerizes the weak-minded. Brooks was unimpressed. “This book reminds you

how important geography is, but it also unwittingly reminds you how important history and culture are, and how certain core conceptions—our notions of individual agency, our assumptions about time and space, our moral intuitions about killing and individual dignity—have been shaped by our civilizations.” If your bourgeois social theory cannot convince the *Times*, you have got a problem.