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OTHER THINGS EQUAL

Three Books of Oomph

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I think the best way for you to grasp what upsets me so much about modern economics is for you to read a little bit in other fields of the intellect. After looking into scientific history or paleoanthropology or literary criticism or Latin literature or astrophysics I'll bet you'll join me in being upset about the scientific dead end that economics has wandered into. *Seriously*, stomach-wrenchingly upset. You and I can go together to the gastroenterologist and get some pills. *Oy*.

The first indigestion-producing example is a book I first read last year, Jered Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*. Diamond is, of all things *not* qualifying one to write the economic history of the world since the last Ice Age, a professor of physiology at a medical school. He's an evolutionary biologist, trained as (of all things) a botanist. The economic historian Joel Mokyr told me that he approached Diamond's book on page 1 the same way I did: "Who's this dope? He's claiming to talk about economic history. *I'm* the expert in economic history around here." Joel says that by page 50 he was converted. It took me only 20 pages, which just shows that Joel has higher intellectual standards than I do.

Diamond argues that the reason Europe ended up so powerful is that it was the inheritor of a biological accident—that plant and animal species, only a small percentage of which prove suitable for domestication, are especially numerous in the great east-west swath of land from China to Spain. And that's why the middle of the swath—Mesopotamia—was the first to get socially organized in a big way. The north-south places, such as Africa and America, were broken up by ecological barriers to the spread of cows, wheat, that sort of thing—the Isthmus of Panama, for example—and also the barrier arising from varied growing conditions by latitude. (Incidentally, that's why the United States had a westward movement instead of a north-south movement: the successive Amish islands, for example, every couple of hundred miles from Pennsylvania west to Iowa, are all at the same latitude because that way the human capital of knowing when to plant and harvest or the like didn't get thrown away.)

Other Things Equal, a column by Deirdre N. McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.

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Diamond makes a lot of other arguments surrounding his central one, ranging from why big, domesticable mammals (such as horses) were killed off in America (answer: humans came suddenly, not giving the animals time to coevolve as wary; so the "hunters" looking for an easy meal, or maybe merely that nice tusk, just walked up to the mastodons and horses and conked them on the head, dodo-style) or why the Austronesian (e.g. Hawaiian) explosion from (of all places) Taiwan did not overwhelm the New Guinean highlanders (answer: the highlanders had developed food production very successfully, and so could outnumber the invaders).

Interesting. But my point here is that in making his arguments Diamond does science. He doesn't do what economists, without acquaintance with any alleged science but their own, persist in imagining is science. Diamond is not big on phony, existence-theorem math or phony, significance-testing statistics. (The temptation to be so must be considerable, since the neighboring field of population biology, like economics, is in love with the cargo-cult techniques perfected after World War II, axiomatic and significance-test game playing.) He is big on quantitative arguments based on factual matter, arguments that have oomph.

For example in arguing the case for New Guinea as a test of how important food production is in causing societies to flourish he uses new linguistic evidence on the origins of Micronesian and Polynesian languages, such as their crop vocabularies. He uses the diversity of American Indian languages (shown nonetheless by Joseph Greenberg and his school to be at root one) as evidence of how hard it was for cultures in the Americas carrying biological innovations (corn, for example) to spread *quickly*—in contrast for instance to the rapid expansion of the Indo-Europeans on horseback.

The philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood, himself a historian of Roman Britain, once defined "scientific" history (by contrast with "scissors-and-paste" history) as studying problems, not periods, asking questions *about the world* and *seeing one's way to answering them*. He notes that a scientist is neither a theorist-philosopher speculating about whether an endogenous-growth model has equilibrium solutions under assumptions x, y, or z nor a scissors-and-paste econometrician rummaging in bad data for significant coefficients; she is on the contrary a maker of testable arguments about real worlds, like a detective.

Diamond does science, I say. He's a detective. At a session of the Economic History Association last year in Los Angeles I heard him talk about his book, after I had gobbled it up (as you will, right?). After Diamond spoke, our own Jeff Sachs gave a similar presentation of his new ideas about geography and underdevelopment—especially the immense yet unaddressed challenges of public health in tropical climes. Consider Africa. Consider AIDS. Or "just" malaria and sleeping sickness. Jeff's scope was the past two centuries, and the century to come, though even this looks a little narrow beside Diamond's 13,000 years. Still, they both were making the same point—biological location matters a lot for economic growth—and making it the same way. Sachs, like Diamond, is a detective, a scientist. So can we all be, if we'll stop spending our valuable time on the non-scientific talk about things "existing." (The economics students in France, by the way, are in open revolution against Cartesian-Samuelsonian-Arrovian economics; they have taken to calling it "autistic" economics. *Aux barricades!*)

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Another example is Niall Ferguson. (What, are unusual Irish names necessary to be a real scientist? Hey, it works for me. I'm told he pronounces his first name just "Neal'). I cite his name rather than his books because he's already written so many in his brief career and I've read so many of them that they are rather blurring together in my mind: he's written an immense, two-volume history of the Rothschild family (did you know that Amartya Sen is married to one of the heiresses?); a great, thick, horrifying volume on World War I; a fascinating edited collection of serious speculations in what-if histories. A young British historian at Oxford, his claim is a simple one, richly developed: that lust and violence, love and justice, are as potent as greed and prudence in the modern world. That is, economic determinism—or even the geographical determinism that Diamond and Sachs favor—needs major supplement if we're going to get the story even approximately right. (At least at the two-century level of detail; at 130 centuries I think perhaps Prudence looks pretty good as an all-purpose hypothesis.) In particular, says this young student of war and of the financiers of governments from Metternich to Churchill, getting the money to fight is what drives and distorts economies. And fighting is seldom really about economics, *pace* Lenin and George Stigler.

Ferguson's breadth and depth of scientific argument puts us Samuelsonian economists to shame. He's not an economist, and I am worried that he doesn't quite grasp the significance of open-economy macroeconomics (but since most economists don't either I reckon he should be given a pass on this one). But like Diamond striding through linguistics and paleoanthropology he has a sure step in using the findings of economic historians—and political, and social, and cultural, and business historians, too. He sees in the history of Tobin's Q and Lindert's debt statistics the way to answering his detective questions: Is war primarily economic in motivation? Is democracy crucial to economic success? Is history, to put it more widely, rational and good?

Or take a professor of English, Jane Tompkins, in her elegant book on the genre of the western in American literature, *West of Everything*. What? An *English* professor? Surely *they* (or I should say "we") aren't "scientists"! Well, Tompkins is. She's a Collingwoodian detective. She asks a question about the world and sees her way to answering it. Why is it, she asks, that the western was invented rather suddenly by Owen Wister in 1902 (*The Virginian*), became immensely popular in novels read mainly by men (Zane Grey), and then popular with everybody in the movies (my multilinguistic Dutch friends find just hilarious the dubbing of John Wayne on the German TV stations)? And then why, rather suddenly in the 1970s, did it die? Why are women characters so clueless in Westerns? Why is talking so devalued? Why are horses and cattle ubiquitous but so strangely neglected (considering that the business of these lads was supposed to be animal husbandry)? Indians, too (considering that their other business was supposed to be killing them)? And then for the answer she marshals the detective's case (the hardboiled detective story, by the way, has a similar history). The western (and detective story), she argues, and shows, and illustrates, and tests beyond reasonable doubt, were reactions to the feminization of American culture in the 19th century. The anxiety about Women Stuff (religion, for example) that her father's and grandfather's generation (I should say *our* fathers' and grandfathers' generation) felt could be assuaged by basking in *High Noon*.

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Observe that Diamond is "just" a botanist and Ferguson is "just" a non-quantitative historian and Tompkins is "just" an English professor. Not physicists. Not mathematicians. Not a significance test in hundreds and hundreds of well-written pages. Not a theorem in sight. Yet all three are really serious about knowing things *about the world.* So the issue is not "science vs. the humanities" or some other simpleton's philosophy of knowledge. What we seek is science in the usual non-English sense, "inquiry."

Get with it, oh my beloved fellow economists. Read, and get that queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach. Read the linguist Merritt Ruhlen's *The Origin of Language.* Read the literary critic Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin.* Read, and compare what these scientists do in discussing language families and Milton's epic poems with the pseudo-science that makes nonsense of even the best articles in our splendid field. And if your stomach really comes to bother you, get Howard Spiro's great book, *Clinical Gastroenterology*, beautifully written (about bowels), steadily quantitative (about ulcers), a detective's guide to gut science.

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