Very Bad News

Clifford Geertz

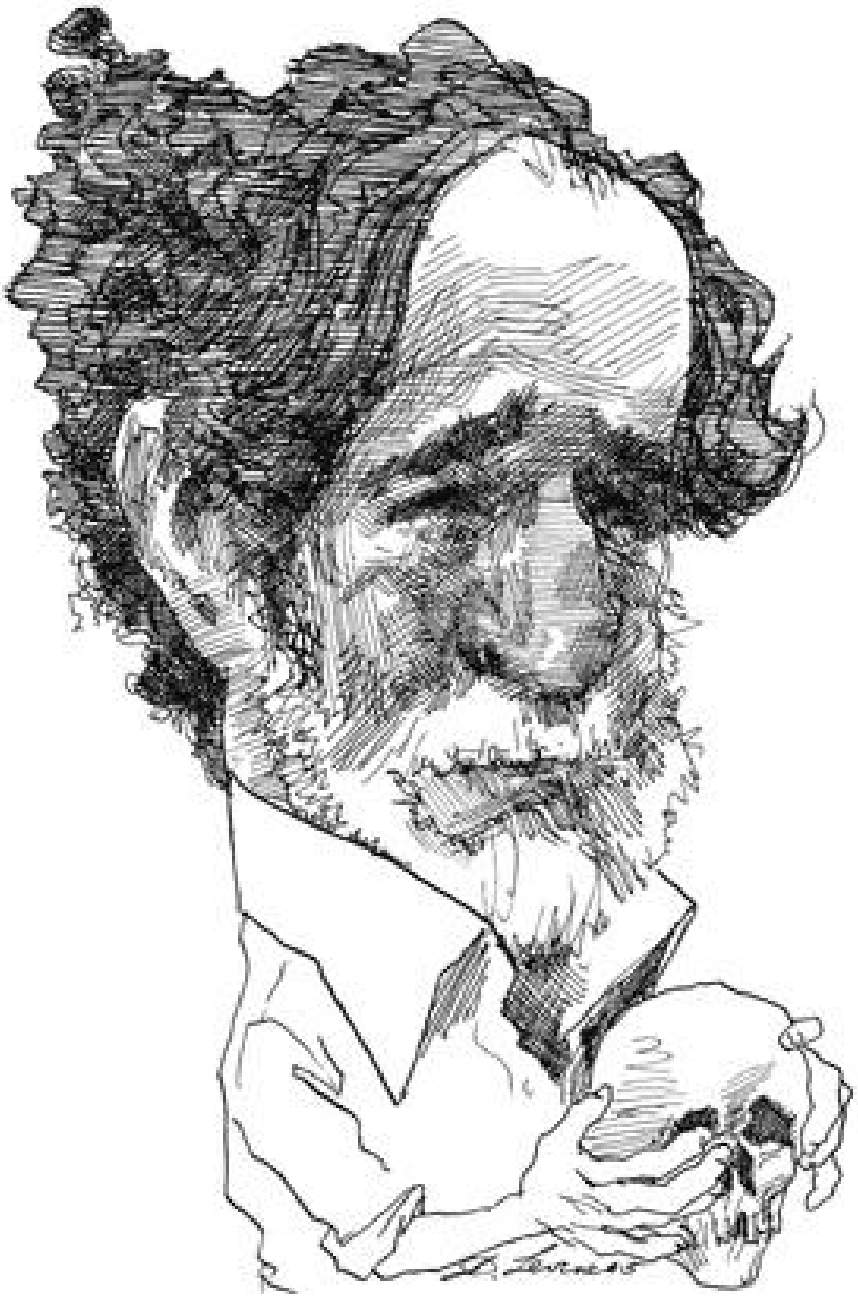
March 24, 2005

Contents

Reviewed:

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed
by Jared Diamond
Viking, 576 pp., $29.95

Catastrophe: Risk and Response
by Richard A. Posner
Oxford University Press, 322 pp., $28.00



Jared Diamond; drawing by David Levine

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire,
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

—Robert Frost (1920)

Have you heard, it's in the stars,
Next July we collide with Mars?

—Cole Porter (1939)

1.

The recent tsunami in southern Asia, in which perhaps a quarter-million people of all ages and conditions were swept indifferently away by a blind cataclysm, has, at least for the moment—perhaps only for the moment—concentrated our minds. Fatality on such a scale, the destruction not only of individual lives but of whole populations of them, threatens the conviction that perhaps most reconciles many of us, insofar as anything this-worldly does, to our own mortality: that, though we ourselves may perish, the community into which we were born, and the sort of life it supports, will somehow live on. The suggestion that this may not be true, that calamity if great enough, or fecklessness if chronic enough, may put an end to the foundations of our collective existence, that beyond its separate members society itself is mortal, is hardly a new idea. Ancient history collects instances, science fiction constructs narratives; the myths of all nations parade warning examples. But the empirical study of how societies die, the comparative examination of cases and the systematic calculation of possibilities, has barely begun. There are not, as yet, any life expectancy tables for civilizations, and the autopsies, partial and archaeological, are inconclusive about the cause of death.

Jared Diamond is a biogeographer and evolutionary psychologist at UCLA, and the author of a sweeping, relentlessly environmentalist account of the reasons for the emergence of the modern West to political and economic predominance, which sold a million copies and won a Pulitzer Prize. Richard Posner is a judge on the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit who, between opinions, has published dozens of free-fire polemics on everything from aging and public intellectuals to the rational organization of sex and the economic analysis of law. They have, as one would ex-

pect, rather different approaches to the question of social fatality.[1] For Diamond, it is a gradual, cumulative affair, accelerating only toward the end when some hard-to-fix tipping point is mindlessly passed. There is a progressive misuse of the natural resources upon which the society is based to the point where collective life collapses into a self-consuming Hobbesean state of nature. For Posner, "catastrophe" is a distant, extrapolated culmination of present trends, an annihilating accident, implicit and unnoticed, waiting to happen—"a momentous tragic usually sudden event [producing] utter overthrow or ruin."

Whether societies waste away in ecological neglect or are destroyed by foreseeable disasters they have failed to prevent, for both writers vigilance and resolve are the price of survival. Awareness is all. However much they may differ in style and method (and they occupy the poles of the social sciences—dogged, fact-thick empiricism on the one side, model-and-calculate political arithmetic on the other), these are consciousness-raising books, tracts for the time. It is later than we think. Later even than we have thought to think.

2.

Jared Diamond formulates the problem as he sees it in the simplest and most straightforward of terms: "Why," as his book jacket puts it, "do some societies, but not others, blunder into self-destruction?" "Why do some societies make disastrous decisions?" "What does it all mean to us today?" And he addresses it equally directly, with the most elemental, describe-and-classify sort of comparative method: the kind of approach he took in earlier works to chart the bird populations of highland New Guinea or trace the evolution of primate sexuality. Look at this, look at that; note the similarities, note the differences; find the thread, tell the story—a natural history of societal failure.

Accordingly, he sets out, in differing degrees and depth of detail and in no particular order of importance, a wide variety of particular cases, opportunistically chosen: archaic societies like Easter Island, the ancient Maya, and the Greenland Vikings, which long ago collapsed into self-produced ecological disaster; third-world emergent states like Rwanda, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic that, disorganized, mismanaged, backward, and overpopulated, are well along toward producing such an outcome for themselves; modern or modernizing civilizations, like China, Australia, and the United States, that appear at the moment to be dynamic and flourishing, but in whom the first premonitory signs of overreach, waste, decline, and ruin are beginning to appear. Then, from the evidence of these cases, he constructs a short and miscella-

[1] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (Norton, 1997). Richard Posner, *Aging and Old Age* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Harvard University Press, 2001); *Sex and Reason* (Harvard University Press, 1992), *The Economics of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1981).

neous checklist of factors that together and separately "contribute" to a society's fate: the inherent fragility of its habitat, the stability of its climate, the friendliness or hostility of its neighbors and trading partners, and, most important of all, the conclusive and decisive determinate force, "the society's responses to its environmental problems." Within the bounds of chance and circumstance, peoples, like individuals, make their own destiny. Choosing well or badly among policies and possibilities, they determine themselves what ultimately becomes of them.

Take Easter Island, at once the most mysterious and the most dramatic ("no other site that I have visited made such a ghostly impression on me") of the once thriving and creative human communities that have simply died and disappeared, vanished whole and entire from the face of the earth. "The most remote habitable scrap of land in the world," 1,300 miles away from its nearest neighbor, sixty-six square miles in area, it was, for nearly eight hundred years, about 900 to 1700 AD, home to a population, at its peak (the estimates, being based on archaeological surveys and explorers' reports, vary widely), of anywhere from six to thirty thousand neolithic yam and taro growers.

Outliers of the great canoe-borne Polynesian civilization that spread across the southern Pacific from New Zealand to Hawaii during the first millennium of the Christian era and essentially cut off, once they had arrived and settled in, from anyone else in the world, they nevertheless managed somehow to carve hundreds of enormous stone statues, fifteen to seventy feet tall, between ten and 270 tons, and raise them to the top of great displaying platforms scattered across the whole island. Images, apparently, of ancestors, gods, or deified chiefs, these now lie toppled and broken, like so many gravestones, across a despoiled and ruined landscape—"the most extreme example of forest destruction in the Pacific...among the most extreme in the world...the whole forest gone ...all of its tree species extinct."

Just how, and by what steps, this ingenious people descended, over seven or eight centuries, into generalized disorder and, when they had cut down the last of the forest and destroyed the whole of the island's animal life, into murder, suicide, starvation, and cannibalism is far from clear. There is only archaeological evidence—settlement sites, kitchen middens, hillside quarries, vast crematoria containing thousands of bodies and huge amounts of bone ash—to go by. Rivalry among competing chieftains (the statues get bigger and bigger over time), natural fluctuations in food resources, and epidemic disease probably all played a part, as did increasingly popular rebellion:

Easter Islanders' toppling of their ancestral moai reminds me of Russians and Romanians toppling the statues of Stalin and Ceaus¸escu.... The islanders must have been filled with pent-up anger at their leaders for a long time.... I wonder how many of the statues were thrown down one by one at intervals, by particular enemies of a statue's owner,...how many were instead destroyed in a quickly spreading paroxysm of anger and disillusionment, as took place at the end of communism.

In any case, the destruction was mindless, total, protracted, and self-inflicted, a lesson and a warning to the way we live now:

Easter's isolation makes it the clearest example of a society that destroyed itself by overexploiting its own resources.... The parallels between [the island] and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious. Thanks to globalization, international trade, jet planes, and the Internet, all countries on earth today share resources and affect each other, just as did Easter's dozen clans. [The island] was as isolated in the Pacific Ocean as the earth is today in space. When the Easter Islanders got into difficulties, there was nowhere to which they could flee, nor to which they could turn for help; nor shall we modern Earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our troubles increase.... [The] collapse of Easter Island society [is] a metaphor, a worst-case scenario, for what may lie ahead of us in our own future.

Diamond describes his other fallen civilizations in similarly monitory tones: so many societal *memento mori*, death-head reminders to the live and prospering. The pre–Puebloan Indians of the American Southwest, the fabled Anasazi "ancient ones," built large apartment complexes, entrepôt towns, and intricate irrigation systems, but succumbed to small-scale climate shifts, land struggles, and overcrowding. The great Mayan cities of the Yucatán were strangled by declining crop yields, runaway deforestation, and a primitive transport system. And the Greenland Vikings, to whom he gives a hundred deliberate pages, disappeared, after four and a half centuries of hardscrabble persistence, in the face of narrowing habitats, disrupted trade connections, and a stubborn unwillingness to adopt Eskimo technologies. Everywhere and every time, when societies have perished they have done so through their own neglect and self-delusion. It was not their environments, however severe, that did them in; or anyway not their environments alone. It was their failure to rise to the challenges those environments posed.

With this moral in hand, Diamond then proceeds in a similarly fact-upon-fact, dogged-does-it manner to examine a miscellaneous collection of contemporary societies in adaptionist terms. The Rwanda genocide, generally attributed to "ancient hatred" tribal conflicts, is blamed instead on a Malthusian crisis: a headlong population increase that produced lethal intrafamilial tensions. Young men could not acquire farms, adult children could not leave home, farm size declined precipitously, gross inequalities engendered internecine jealousy. On the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, two scarred and impoverished third-world societies, Franco-African Haiti and Spanish-Indian Dominica, offer, side by side, a study in contrasts: the first "the poorest country in the New World, and one of the poorest in the world outside of Africa," ruined, resourceless, a development basket case; the second still bearing the marks of a caudillo state, with a dependent, top-down economy, politicized forestry, and an artificial construction boom complete with urban traffic jams.

Australia suffers from overgrazing, "land mining," and man-made desiccation, leading "those of us inclined to pessimism or even just to realistic sober thinking" to wonder whether the country is "doomed to a declining standard of living in a steadily deteriorating environment." China, a "lurching giant," big and fast-growing, and ecologically heedless, is ravaged by pollution, waste, and "the world's largest development

projects"—dams, floodings, water diversions—"all expected to cause severe environmental problems...the disruption of major ecosystem[s]...[the] uprooting [of] millions of people."

In the United States, Los Angeles, where he lives, is choked with smog and traffic, its elite having retreated to gated communities; Montana, where he spends his summers, once among the top ten states in per-capita income, is now forty-ninth out of fifty, because of the decline of the extraction industries—logging, coal and copper mining, oil, and gas—which have left behind them a poisoned landscape and a second-home society of self-absorbed seasonal visitors, "half-retirees" from the megapolitan coasts. "Failure to anticipate," "failure to perceive," "rational bad behavior," "disastrous values," "unsuccessful solutions," "psychological denial," "groupthink" are present everywhere.

There are some signs of hope. Japan has managed its forests effectively, highland New Guinea has stabilized its garden economy, radical reform is beginning in Australia, environmentalist activism is growing in the United States. But in general, the prospects are bleak. The modern world is caught up in an "exponentially accelerating horse race" between bigger and bigger environmental problems and increasingly desperate attempts to deal with them. "Many readers of this book are young enough, and will live long enough, to see the outcome."

3.

Richard Posner's conception of the sorry end awaiting us if we are insufficiently alert is as futuristic as Diamond's is haunted by history. Collision with an asteroid that could shatter the earth into a thousand pieces. Precipitate global warming that could, paradoxically, turn it into a giant snowball. A runaway particle experiment that could squeeze the planet down to an uninhabitable hyper-dense marble. Gene-spliced pandemic, nuclear-winter war, run-amok robots, self-assembling nanomachines, billionths of a meter across, gobbling up everything in their path until they have consumed all of life. A cloud of extinction events, bodeful and indeterminate, hovers on the world horizon or just over it. Unless we rethink how we order our lives and manage our technology, and perhaps even if we do, the worst may be yet to come.

The main problem, over and above their mind-bending dimensions, is that these various sorts of megacatastrophes seem to most people either so far off, so unlikely, or so thoroughly beyond what they have even vicariously experienced—psychologically off-scale, conceptually out-of-sight—as to be beyond the range of rational estimation or practical response. We are both emotionally disinclined and intellectually ill-equipped to think systematically about extreme events. Absorbed as we are in the dailiness of ordinary life, and enfolded by its brevity, the calculation of remote possibilities and the comparison of transcendent cataclysms look pointless; comic, even. That, Posner argues, must change, and change radically if we are to have a chance of averting, for ourselves and our descendants, a final annihilation:

The dangers of catastrophe are growing. One reason is the rise of apocalyptic terrorism. Another... is the breakneck pace of scientific and technological advance.... The cost of dangerous technologies, such as those of nuclear and biological warfare, and the level of skill required to employ them are falling, which is placing more of the technologies within reach of small nations, terrorist gangs, and even individual psychopaths. Yet, great as it is, the challenge of managing the catastrophic risks is receiving less attention than is lavished on social issues of far less intrinsic significance, such as race relations, whether homosexual marriage should be permitted, the size of the federal deficit, drug addiction, and child pornography. Not that these are trivial issues. But they do not involve events of potential extinction or the modestly less cataclysmic variants of those events.

The first necessity is obviously to distinguish the threats. Where are we to begin? Are natural accidents like tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, glaciations, and asteroid collisions the most pressing danger? ("An asteroid that struck what is now Mexico 65 million years ago, though estimated to have been only 10 kilometers...in diameter when it entered the earth's atmosphere, is believed to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs.... A similar collision is believed to have occurred 250 million years ago wiping out 90 percent of the species living then.") Or is it a germ-war pandemic, "the possibility that science, bypassing evolution, will enable monkeypox to be 'juiced up' through gene splicing into a far more lethal pathogen than smallpox ever was"? Or a laboratory accident? A shower of quarks in a particle accelerator self-reassembled into "a very compressed object called a strangelet [that] would keep growing until all matter was converted to strange matter"? A similarly generated "phase transition" that would "rip the fabric of space itself" and "[destroy] all the atoms in the entire universe"?

Genetically modified crops? Artificial life? Mechanical super-intelligence? Species loss? Greenhouse pollution? Cyberterrorism? Posner reviews them all in turn, in a hectic flurry of piled-up fact-bites, speculative calcula-tions, passing quarrels, and offhand policy dicta—an orderless mixture of assertion, guess, remark, and opinion for which the term "farrago" would seem to have been invented. The result, perhaps unsurprisingly, is rather like a lawyer's brief. If one line of reasoning fails to carry, try another. If one expert demurs, find one who doesn't.

The threats identified, the costs of their impact, should they contrive to occur, must be somehow assessed, a formidable task when you are dealing with minuscule probabilities, anomalous events, and world-shaking consequences. Posner largely handles the problem of estimating danger via sheer postulation—weird and (one assumes, unintentionally) madcap burlesque. "Suppose the cost of extinction of the human race...can be *very* conservatively estimated at 600 trillion dollars [and there is] a 1 in 10 million annual probability of a strangelet disaster." "Suppose there is a 70 percent probability that in 2024 global warming will cause a social loss of $1 trillion." "Suppose that [a] $2 billion expenditure reduces the probability of [a bioterrorist attack] from .01 to .0001." That done, cost-benefit analysis, the assigning of numerical weights to policy proposals—emission taxes, sky-search programs, early-warning systems, accelerator

inspections—can then be applied (at least theoretically: "people have trouble placing a money value on 'products' remote from what they are accustomed to find offered for sale") to determine what proportion of its resources society as a whole, and especially American society, "dollar-weighted...about one-fourth of the world," ought to devote to one or another of them: where this or that catastrophe should rank on our scale of worries.

On this basis, page after page of statistical assumption (most people "would rather have a reasonable assurance of living to 70 than a 50 percent probability of living to 50 and a 50 percent probability of living to 90") and speculative number crunching ("...let me make a wild guess that the benefits [of Brookhaven's Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider] can be valued at $250 million per year"), Posner arrives at a series of sweeping conclusions, confident and emphatic, and not a little unnerving, concerning what it is that, "better safe than sorry," needs posthaste to be done.

An International Environmental Protection Agency to enforce treaty-determined environmental norms—a stronger and more binding Kyoto Protocol—should be created. (Conservatives' worry that international institutions put the United States at the mercy of other nations is misplaced: "as the world's most powerful nation, the United States tends to dominate international organizations, and, when it does not, it ignores them with impunity.") A worldwide police agency, "a greatly strengthened Interpol," is needed to deal with bioterrorism, "precisely because it is a police problem as well as a scientific and medical one." (Not just the investigation and apprehension of terrorists as such "but also of innocent scientists who by failing to observe security precautions may become [their] unwitting accomplices" demands a global system of official surveillance.) The policy of allowing foreign students open access to our universities ought to be reexamined. ("It is doubtful that all of those who [have] returned home [have], by virtue of their sojourn in the United States, become inoculated against rabid anti-Americanism.")

Scientists, whose "goal is knowledge, not safety...cannot be entrusted with the defense of the nation and the human race." ("The Large-aperture Synoptic Survey Telescope...would as we know be an ideal tool for identifying potentially hazardous near-earth objects. The principal advocates of the project, however, are interested not in near-earth objects, but in remote galaxies.") They need to be brought to a more responsible awareness of their social duty—perhaps by a science court manned by "scientifically literate lawyers," perhaps by a federally funded "Center for Catastrophic-Risk Assessment and Response." "Johnny-one-note civil libertarians uttering fallacious slogans," peddling "bromides about free speech," and obsessing over "coercive interrogation" may object that such measures break constitutional norms. But since September 11, "the marginal cost of civil liberties [has] increased dramatically." As the risk is great, so must be the response:

In wartime we tolerate all sorts of curtailments of our normal lib-erties...conscription, censorship, disinformation, intrusive surveillance, or suspension of habeas corpus. A lawyer might say that this is because war is a legal status that authorizes such cur-

tailments. But to a realist it is not war as such, but danger to the unusual degree associated with war, that justifies the curtailments. The headlong rush of science and technology has brought us to the point at which a handful of terrorists may be more dangerous than an enemy nation.... It has been a commonplace since Thomas Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* that trading independence for security can be a profitable swap.... Only the will is wanting.

4.

For all their differences—Diamond's pageant and panorama, Posner's hodgepodge and swirl, Diamond's materialism, Posner's utilitarianism, Diamond's earnest prophesying, Posner's belligerent policy mongering—both are engaged, at bottom, in the same sort of exercise: engineering a social mood. They are out to alter attitudes, redirect mind-sets, refocus worries; transform the currents of popular feeling. They ask, in somewhat different ways, the same question: "Is the modern way of life globally sustainable?" And they give, on the basis of somewhat different material, the same answer: "Not as it stands."

Looking around, one finds it hard to argue. There are enough calamities, actual and looming, natural and man-made, to give anyone pause, even if they still fall a bit short of Diamond's isolate and castaway Easter Island or Posner's world-devouring nanomachines. Kobe and Banda Aceh, Bhopal and Chernobyl, September 11 and Madrid, Rwanda and Darfur; AIDS, deforestation, overpopulation, urban sprawl, pollution, and the proliferation of industrial waste seem near out-of-hand; and it is, in fact, difficult to imagine a world in which the Chinese use of automobiles matches the American. Yet it is possible to wonder whether the situation will yield to alarm and entreaty, the cry havoc persuasion of large numbers of minds. Decline and fall melodramas and sci-fi scenarios may serve to italicize crisis, but it is not so clear what they do to engage it.

What is most striking about both Diamond's and Posner's views of human behavior is how sociologically thin and how lacking in psychological depth they are. Neither the one, who seems to regard societies as collective persons, minded super-beings intending, deciding, acting, choosing, nor the other, for whom there are only goal-seeking individuals, perceiving and calculating rational actors not always rational, has very much to say about the social and cultural contexts in which their disasters unfold. Either heedless and profligate populations "blunder" or "stumble" their way into self-destruction or strategizing utility maximizers fail to appreciate the true dimensions of the problems they face. What happens to them happens in locales and settings, not in culturally and politically configurated life-worlds—singular situations, immediate occasions, particular circumstances.

But it is within such life-worlds, situations, occasions, circumstances, that calamity, when it occurs, takes intelligible shape, and it is that shape that determines both the response to it and the effects that it has. However "natural," "physical," or "material"

they may be, and however unpredictable or unintended, collapse and catastrophe are, like coups and recessions, riots and religious movements, social events.

A cataclysmic flood in southern Asia projects world powers into the midst of the most local of local conflicts—Sumatran separatism, Sri Lankan civil war. An AIDS pandemic shakes the foundations of family life and alters power relationships across an entire subcontinent. The state's response, selective and defensive, to a nuclear accident in the Ukraine alters the whole language of rights and obligations in an emerging nation. An industrial accident in a US-owned plant in central India leaves behind it a quarter-century of litigation and legislation, claim and counterclaim, that shapes attitudes toward everything from the limits of corporate responsibility to the foundations of distributive justice. The introduction of efficient methods of selective harvesting into the Indonesia rain forests by Japanese multinationals rearranges the relationships between the forests' inhabitants, the urban-centered central government, and the broader world of global trade.

Monographic attention to such critical examples should take us further than either Diamond's chronicles or Posner's scenarios toward whatever understanding and whatever control of the disruptions and disintegrations of modern life are actually available to us.[2]

Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) was an anthropologist. Widely recognized as the most influential American anthropologist of the twentieth century, Geertz championed the role of symbols in the creation and interpretation of social meaning. His many books include *Peddlers and Princes: Social Development and Economic Change in Two Indonesian Towns* and *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics.*

Post-Script

June 9, 2005 issue
In response to:
Very Bad News from the March 24, 2005 issue
To the Editors:
In my article "Very Bad News" [*NYR*, March 24] I confused the names of Dominica, a small island in the Caribbean, and the Dominican Republic, the Spanish-speaking

[2] Under the general rubric of "the anthropology and sociology of science," such a monographic literature about particular disasters has begun to appear. See, on the Ukraine case, Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl* (Princeton University Press, 2002); on the Union Carbide tragedy in India, Kim Fortun, *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders* (University of Chicago Press, 2001); on the commercial exploitation of Indonesia's forests, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

half of the island of Hispaniola, and perhaps too glibly referred to the latter as "Spanish-Indian," whereas the Indian element has long since been radically reduced. I apologize for the error.

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Clifford Geertz
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<nybooks.com/articles/2005/03/24/very-bad-news>