

Literary Review of Canada, Vol. 15, No. 6, July/August 2007

The following letter was published in response to the book review of *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization* by Mel Cappe. To read it, [click here](#).

To the Editor:

It is terrific fun—and indeed an honour—to be reviewed by someone of Mel Cappe's erudition and intellectual scope, especially when the reviewer engages constructively and largely fairly with one's book.

But the review contains a surprising number of small and (alas) large mistakes. The account of my discussion of tectonic stresses and multipliers is basically right, but in the next sentences things go off the rails. I don't see much resembling my ideas in Mr. Cappe's comments on synchronous failure and threshold effects. Later, he claims I say that the economist Paul Krugman is a defender of "the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism." But I don't say anything of the kind anywhere in the book — or anywhere else.

Much of the review is also surprisingly patronizing.

My writing style, story telling and personal enthusiasm clearly grate on this reviewer, at least sometimes. But any author trying to get across complex (often scientific) ideas to a general audience has to use many tools to keep readers' attention while ensuring accurate understanding. I've found that anecdotes, first-person accounts and simple everyday examples are indispensable. And, frankly, it's a bit sad that an author's expressions of wonder and curiosity are taken as signs of naiveté.

But the real heart of the review, and the heart of my (friendly) disagreement with Mr. Cappe, is the discussion of humankind's potential to solve its grave problems. Here, it is clear, Mr. Cappe is an unabashed optimist, while I would characterize myself as a realist. Yes, human beings have shown historically that they are enormously creative, adaptive and ingenious (my repeated acknowledgement of this fact isn't noted in the review), but the issue is whether we will be ingenious enough to solve the problems we've created for ourselves now. Since writing *The Ingenuity Gap* I've decided that in the absence of crisis — perhaps caused by some kind of social breakdown under rising stress — we probably won't be ingenious enough. But a crisis might just do the trick: sometimes human beings only really get going when the going gets really tough. The deciding factor will be whether we have prepared in advance to exploit that crisis — so as to produce a humane, as opposed to a violent, outcome.

And on economic growth, I believe Mr. Cappe is just plain wrong. The threat of climate change alone will focus our minds this century. Current projections suggest the global economy will quadruple in size by 2100. If this happens, even if we make huge strides in energy and material efficiency, carbon output into our atmosphere will probably double from today's levels. And in that case, it's likely game over for the habitability of Earth, at least for large numbers of human beings.

If Professor Benjamin Friedman is correct, and our only route to freedom and democracy is perpetual economic growth, then we're in a real bind. But I'm convinced that a steady-state global economy can be compatible with liberty. Figuring out how to make it so will demand every ounce of our ingenuity as the future's crises unfold.

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