

Mathematics and Music: Aesthetic Links, Spring 2011

Paper on *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*

Due: Friday, Feb. 11, Start of Class

Your assignment is to write an essay responding to one of the three topics described below. The paper should be 3-4 double-spaced pages in length. This is not intended to be a “research paper” but rather a detailed and thoughtful response, supported with information and quotes from the text, to one of the three given topics. You do not have to answer every question posed for a given topic. The questions are intended to provide an overall framework for a particular theme. Your ultimate goal is to construct a thorough and well-supported academic argument. You should make some claims and then support and develop them with thorough reasoning, evidence from the text and/or well-accepted postulates.

You will be given two grades – one for the quality of your argument, the other for the quality of the writing (correct grammar, spelling, sentence structure, organization, etc.). Your overall grade will be the average of these two grades. Be sure to read your paper over carefully several times before turning it in. It is recommended that you have a classmate read a draft version of your paper and that you seek out assistance from the Writer’s Workshop if necessary.

The specific topic you are addressing and your overall response to it should be clearly stated in the first paragraph. Your paper should have a clear and identifiable purpose. The body of the paper should contain your reasoning and the evidence that led to your conclusions. You do **not** need to summarize the book or any chapters from the book. You can assume that you are writing for someone who has read the book.

When quoting directly from the text, please include a reference to the page using the following example as a guide.

Diamond states that “In part because of this [Easter Island’s] history of exploitation and oppression, there has been resistance among both islanders and scholars to acknowledging the reality of self-inflicted environmental damage” (Diamond, p. 113).

Topics

- *Ancient Versus Modern*

One of the goals of *Collapse* is to draw parallels between past and present societies, in an attempt to learn from previous mistakes and head off possible future collapses. Pick two societies discussed in the book, one ancient and one modern, and compare and contrast the key factors that led or may lead to the collapse of each society. Are there lessons worth learning from the ancient society that are applicable to the modern society? Are some of the mistakes from the past being repeated yet again? Do you agree with Diamond’s basic premise that the past and present are closely connected, or do you think there is an essential ingredient that distinguishes us (the modern world) from previous civilizations, thereby weakening Diamond’s cause for concern?

- *Collapse of the United States?*

If the United States *were* to collapse, how do you think it will happen? What would it look like? Which of Diamond's five factors defined at the outset of the book would play a major role in the demise of the U.S.? Are there additional factors that could be relevant? Would the collapse occur suddenly, as with the society on Easter Island or Maya civilization, or would it be a gradual and stable decline, such as with Great Britain after World War II? Which ancient and/or modern societies should we look to as examples to avoid or cases to admire? Explain.

- *Men and Women for Others*

Part of the mission of Holy Cross is to foster a community which engages in fundamental questions such as "What are our obligations to one another?" and "What is our special responsibility to the world's poor and powerless?" With that in mind, what personal obligation or responsibility, if any, do you have to address the challenges posed in Diamond's work, particularly those raised in the final chapters? Using evidence and arguments from the book, describe a personal course of action to address these challenges. Are there particular strengths, experiences or talents you possess that would be helpful in confronting some of these issues? Has this book forced you to consider any changes in your future educational or vocational path? Do you feel a new (or renewed) obligation to "serve" after reading this book? Are there any courses, fields or travel you would like to pursue during your Holy Cross education related to these issues? Try to be specific as you answer some of these questions, drawing directly from the text topics or passages that most influenced your thinking.