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The Next Collapse: Humanity?

In his book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,* author Jared Diamond states, “for the first time in history, humans face the risk of a global decline” (Diamond 23). *Collapse*, written in 2005, recounts major societal crashes throughout centuries, some of which show similarities to our global society. When considering each country in the world as a “tribe” that makes up the bigger civilization, the collapse of Easter Island is used as a metaphor to describe the potential crash of humanity on a global scale. In fact, the demise of the Easter Islanders shows examples of environmental damages, climate changes, and poor communal responses. Though today, some feel societal collapse at the global level is an almost impossible prospect, the causes of the Easter Island collapse might suggest different.

Diamond cites five major things that can lead a civilization to a “collapse”: environmental damages, climate changes, hostile neighbors, decreased support of friendly neighbors, and society’s response to its problems (Diamond 14). This paper will only discuss environmental damages, climate changes, and society’s response. Since the world as a whole will be considered as a single, isolated civilization in space, there are no neighbors to speak of – friendly or hostile.

Easter Island is located in the southeastern Pacific Ocean, and was considered essentially isolated, especially when canoe was the only travel possibility. Those who lived there belonged to their own tribe, and worked to build stone pieces, referred to as ahu and moai: the ahu being stone platforms, and moai as the giant stone statues. Though 300 ahu have been found in Easter Island, one hundred thirteen of them are topped with moai, and 25 are deemed tremendously elaborate. Since each of the twelve tribes had at least one to five of these elaborate ahu with moai, a competition within the tribes to have the most number of or perhaps most elaborate statues is evident.(Diamond 96). In order to build these statues, which were revered by the Easter Island society, rampant deforestation stripped the island bare, as trees were being harvested for heat and timber. Obviously, a lack of trees led to a reduction in “native plants and birds” and prevented the islanders from building canoes to travel through the Pacific Ocean to neighboring islands (Diamond 107). The environmental damages caused by deforestation also led to severe climate changes for the Easter Islanders. The island’s forests provided protection for the crops from the wind, but without the trees, soil erosion spread through the island as the topsoil was blown away (Diamond 108). The Easter Islander’s fate was set – with no crops, they were doomed; but have the environmental damages to Earth doomed us?

Earth’s environmental damages are much more complex than those of the Easter Islanders. As a society, along with mass deforestation in places as extraordinary as our rainforests, we have unintentionally worked to break down our ozone layer and potentially raised our global temperature. These three examples of environmental damage undoubtedly have led to many climate changes, such as an increase in carbon dioxide emissions from our pollutant-filled lives and a decreased number of trees to help counter-act those emissions. With our new technology and large population, every environmental decision the world makes, no matter how small, effects our society in some way or another. In *Collapse*, Diamond states: “if mere thousands of Easter Islanders with just stone tools and their own muscle power sufficed to destroy their environment and thereby destroyed their society, how can billions of people with metal tools and machine power now fail to do worse” (Diamond 119)? Clearly, from this quote, Diamond’s beliefs about the potential downfall of the world are evident: a collapse of our civilization due to environmental damages is definitely a possibility.

Hopefully, however, we will be able to react to our problems better than the Easter Islanders did. Diamond blames the two main reasons for Easter’s collapse as being “human environmental impacts, especially deforestation…. and political, social and religious factors behind the impacts, such as…competitions between clans and chiefs driving the erection of bigger statues requiring more wood, rope and food” (Diamond 199). Not only did the environmental damages and climate changes hurt their society, the islanders’ poor reactions to their problems helped turn the once prosperous society to one struggling to stay alive. In fact, even when the islanders realized their climate was in terrible shape, with a serious lack of food and natural resources, the leaders of each Easter Island tribe still pushed forward to produce more statues. Though the heads of the tribes probably realized the statues were bringing problems to Easter Island, they refused to stop, and Easter Island was doomed.

So one might wonder how the Easter Islanders managed not to recognize that rampant deforestation was leading to serious environmental changes. Diamond blames this phenomenon on something he calls “creeping normalcy” and “landscape amnesia”, which state that since some environmental changes happen slowly, people in the society do not even notice it (Diamond 426). These terms obviously could apply to the Easter Islanders, who, at the time of building statues without thinking of the environmental consequences, damaged their environment over so many generations, probably had no idea what the forests used to be and how bountiful of the crop yields were.

In the last 150 years, the world has undergone more industrial changes than probably any time in history. With the production of oil dependent means of travel and home and business fuel, our environment has suffered as we have grown. In the last 5 years, previously developing countries, such as China and India, have taken momentous steps to develop industry within their country borders. Therefore, creeping normalcy could also readily apply to humanity. With today’s “potent technology, globalization…dependence of millions on modern medicine for survival, and…much larger human population”, Diamond states we are in some ways at a greater risk of collapse than previous civilizations (Diamond 8). We bulldoze our rainforests, demolish or land to eradicate all the natural resources we can, and have made only small steps globally to think more cautiously about the environment. The Earth could easily be referred to as an “ecological disaster unfolding in complete isolation”, as Diamond describes Easter Island (Diamond 82). We refuse to learn from the mistakes of our predecessors, causing environmental damages and reacting as though there is little wrong with our way of life.

In *Collapse,* Jared Diamond subtly compares our society to that of the Easter Islanders. With all the similarities between the lifestyle of the Easter Islanders and modern-day humanity, the demise of Earth seems imminent. However, it should be noted that Diamond both opens and ends *Collapse* on a reflection of hope: “perhaps we can learn from the past, but only if we think carefully about its lessons”, and “by reflecting deeply on causes of past failures, we…may be able to mend our ways and increase our chances for future success” (Diamond 8, 440). Though the connections between Easter Island and Earth seem abundant, Diamond gives hope for the sustainability of our society. The hope comes from the fact that we have the resources to learn from past mistakes. As a final reflection to take away from *Collapse,* Diamond unmistakably hopes humanity is able to learn from history with enough time to save us, something the Easter Islanders were unable to do.