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Still a chance

Today the world is moving at an unbelievably fast pace. China is producing like no one has before, and technology is moving at a rapid rate. Mechanisms such as computers were luxuries to most in the recent past. Now however almost each American household has at least one. Much labor that required brute strength before can now be done with much efficiency with modern technology. But are these advancements bringing only benefits or drastic costs? Is the First World way of living paradise or an illusion that is soon to break? In his book, *Collapse*, Jared Diamond talks about many societies and how they either succeeded or collapsed. He talks about many choices made by societies such as the complete deforestation that led to an irreversible collapse. Looking at the choices made by the past societies, an important question is, are we in a parallel situation? Diamond talks about how today we should look at past societies and what lead to their collapses as a warning. We should look at what we are doing today so that we can prevent another collapse, which may not affect just the United States but possibly the whole interconnected world.

The Maya, a civilization that dates back to about 2000 B.C had its best times during the classical periods of 200-900 A.D. The Maya civilization was located in modern day Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. It was regarded as one of the most advanced societies of its time. But after the classical period,

The city was desolate. No remnant of this race hangs round the ruins, with traditions handed down from father to son and from generation to generation. It lay before us like a shattered bark in the midst of the ocean, her mast gone, her name effaced, her crew perished, and none to tell whence she came, to whom she belonged, how long on her journey, or what caused her destruction…..( Diamond, 158).

Diamond tells us what the archaeologist, climatologists and paleoecologists found to explain the most probable causes for their collapse was. He says,

Maya illustrate four of our points. They did damage their environment, especially by deforestation and erosion. Climate changes (drought) did contribute to the Maya collapse, probably repeatedly. Hostilities among the Maya themselves did play a large role. Finally, political/cultural factors, especially the competition among kings and nobles that led to a chronic emphasis on war and erecting monuments rather than on solving underlying problems, also contributed. (Diamond, 160).

Diamond had five points/causes that he believed caused a collapse of a society. The first point, “involves damage that people inadvertently inflict on their environment.” (Diamond, 11). The second point “is climate change, a term that today we tend to associate with global warming caused by humans.” (Diamond, 12). The third point “is hostile neighbors.” (Diamond, 13). The fourth point “is the converse of the third set: decreased support by friendly neighbors, as opposed to increased attacks by hostile neighbors.” (Diamond, 14). The last point “involves the ubiquitous question of the society’s response to its problems, whether those problems are environmental or not.” (Diamond, 14). Diamond believes that since the Mayans didn’t have supportive neighbors, the other four factors were the cause of their collapse.

“For the elite as well as commoners, corn constituted at least 70% of the Maya diet, as deduced from isotope analyses of ancient Maya skeletons.” (Diamond, 162-163). This shows how unbalanced the Maya diet was. There was little to no protein in the diet. “Venison was mainly a luxury food for the elite.” (Diamond, 163). During the classic period where many aspects of life were going well for the Maya, the population also grew. Many people had to move up the mountains to harvest enough food to feed themselves and their family. Because of the Spanish invasion many written work of the Mayans had been destroyed. There has been no written records found of how the soil was on the mountain side and that droughts came in cycles, some believe that the Maya were unaware of complications that were about to come. By planting on the mountain soil the Mayans had very little crop yields. Since deforestation was also a part of the Mayan lifestyle the mountain soil eroded and forced the Mayans back down to the main lands. The erosion of the mountain soil also impacted the yields of the main land soil. The overpopulated Mayans over used the soil without letting it naturally fertilize which caused a decrease in yields. This caused civil wars over land and mass violence. The elite of the Maya were not very supportive of the people and only cared about erecting monuments, and wasting scare resources. This also contributed to the last monument being erecting during 900 A.D and none after.

The Maya collapse is very similar to some current conflicts happening in the world. The best example is Rwanda where rapid population growth and ignorance of the past have caused many problems. “Unfortunately, Rwanda’s economics improvements became halted by drought and accumulating environmental problems (especially deforestation, soil erosion, and soil fertility losses).” (Diamond, 315). This quote from Diamond’s book shows many similarities between the collapse of the Maya and Rwanda. Another reason that contributed to Rwanda’s collapse was hostile neighbors; Uganda’s invasion was a reason that caused their fall. For the people of Rwanda, the quote, “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” in the novel *The Go-Between* by L.P. Hartley, is completely the opposite, because it has not learned from the things that the Mayans did wrong.

On the other hand there is one modern company that has learned from the mistake of the past. Chevron Niugini Pty.Ltd has invested in its oil plants so that it can prevent a major cost in the future. Chevron and its employees have much concern for its plant and the environment. Jared Diamond says, “That was an introduction to Chevron’s extreme concern, constantly instilled in its employees, about safety and environmental protection. I have never observed an oil spill on any of my four visits.” (Diamond, 445). When Diamond asked Chevron’s safety representative the reason for their plant being environmentally friendly, Diamond said,

his short answer was: ‘*Exxon Valdez,* Piper Alpha, and Bhopal.’ He was referring to the huge oil spill from the running aground off Alaska of Exxon’s oil tanker the *Exxon Valdez* in 1989, the 1998 fire on occidental petroleum’s Piper Alpha oil platform in the North Sea that killed 167 people, and the 1984 escape of chemicals at Union Carbide’s Bhopal chemical plant in India that killed 4,000 people and injured 200,000.”(Diamond, 446).

This clearly shows that Chevron has learned from the mistakes of others in the past and has adjusted its operations to prevent such a disaster. Because of Chevron’s concern for the environment it has been able to get contracts to setup new oil plants in places where many other companies have been denied. Chevron has learned that it is much easier to invest a couple of million dollars rather than having to pay billions of dollars for cleanup.

Unlike Chevron there are still companies that commit what Diamond called “Rape-Run”. The companies sign a lease contract; quickly obtain the resources (such as wood) and leave.

Companies merely send in a logging ship, quickly negotiate permission with local people, carry out the logging, and dispense with a government permit. For example, about 70% of all wood cut in Indonesia comes from illegal operations that cost the Indonesian government nearly a billion dollars a year in lost taxes royalties, and lease payments. (Diamond, 471).

These companies are only helping themselves and creating disastrous complications for countries like Indonesia. Both sides need to look at the past and realize that trees are an essential part of the environment and cutting down more trees than what can be restored can lead to problems for many. The Indonesian government has to realize what is going on and has to stop these “Rape-Run” activities. It has to inform its people that they should not fall into these companies’ bribes. Diamond says, “Local permission is obtained by wooing village leaders who may or may not have the power to sign away logging rights and by taking those leaders to the national capital or else overseas.” (Diamond, 471). The government has to be aware of this and intervene in the corrupt operations of the logging companies in order to prevent a collapse.

Today in our modern world it is evident that Global Warming has been caused due to a high level of pollution. Producing electricity to driving cars, all operation could not be completed without emitting a certain amount of air pollution. Diamond talks about how certain chemicals are released into the air and that,

We swallow them in our food and water, breathe them in our air, and absorb them through our skin. Often in very low concentrations, they variously cause birth defects, mental retardation, and temporary or permanent damage to our immune and reproductive system. (Diamond, 491-492).

This can be seen as an invisible disaster that is growing and could someday be visible to all. Our modern technology has brought us much advancement but they do come at a cost to the environment and possibly even a cost to us. We have to use our resources very intelligently or we will not be able to learn from the past. Everything has its limits and we have to be aware of them. Coal, fossil fuel, and natural gas will eventually run out and we have to acknowledge that and improve our society so that we don’t heavily depend on those sources for electricity and other things.

The world population is increasing and becoming more technologically advanced, which has increased demand for commodities such as electricity and the more electricity that we produce through our current processes the more pollution we will cause. China for instance has done a very great thing by limiting the number of children a family can have. Although limiting freedom the Chinese people can avoid a collapse due to overpopulation and insufficient resources. More population also means more demand for food. This will lead to overfishing by many fishers to keep up with demand. In the long run this could have sufficient effects on the supply of the foods that we eat and even on the environment itself.

Today in our modern world the First World way of living has been pictured as a way of living that includes massive pollution and waste of resources. We have to change this perception of the First World way of living into a beautiful and environmentally friendly way. Sometimes moral values have to be considered less over the long run prosperity of a nation. For example, China by restricting the number of children that the citizens could have, has reduced the freedom of every individual, but it has assured prosperity for the future. Actions that benefit society in the long run may be harsh to implement, but will cause developing countries to look up to the First World countries as role models which will help preserve the earth, not destroy it. Looking at the quote, “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” I think Diamond would agree. He would say,

My remaining cause for hope is another consequence of the globalized modern world’s interconnectedness. Past societies lacked archaeologists and television…….. Today, though, we turn on our television sets or radios or pick up the newspapers, and we see, hear, or read about what happened in Somalia or Afghanistan a few hours earlier. Our television documentaries and books show us in graphic detail why the Easter Islanders, Classic Maya, and other past societies collapsed. Thus, we have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of distant peoples and past peoples. That’s an opportunity that no past society enjoyed to such a degree. (Diamond, 525).

And this is why we still have a chance.