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Collapse

Jared Diamond recounts, in his book Collapse, how civilizations across time have fallen, while also indirectly speculating on the fate of modern day societies. Diamond would in some ways agree with the quote from L.P. Hartley that “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” He clearly states that people in the past have essentially been foreign because of the things they value socially and culturally. Easter Island, for example, focused all their time and resources to building these elaborate stone structures called moai, which sat on even bigger stone platforms called ahu. Mayan Kings wanted to impress their rivals with large-scale temples, while societies today focus more of their efforts on prospering through tangible economic results. The most important thing to note, however, is that Diamond does not see past and present civilizations as totally different because he makes the point that some things really have not changed that much over the years. Present day societies still have pretty severe problems because humans have not changed their ways from the past. Although Diamond agrees that the past was foreign, he still leaves open the question of whether these types of collapses could ever happen again. Despite all the obliviousness to problems by these societies, Diamond still makes the claim that modern society has the potential to fall just like the island civilizations, and for similar reasons. The Earth remains quite isolated. If the resources run out, which they eventually will, mankind will have no help, the same problem that killed off the natives of Easter Island. War over insignificant things can lead to loss of population and misuse of valuable resources like what happened to the Mayans when the kings and nobles started fighting each other for the remaining resources. All these things remain potential problems for human society because Diamond states that the greedy attitude that hurt the past societies still remains around the world today.

For the most part, Jared Diamond agrees with the statement that the past is a foreign country where they did things differently. Mainly he argues that the past island civilizations had their focus directed away from striving as societies and redirected to seemingly pointless tasks. Easter Island people spent all their time and extra resources building giant stone sculptures that rested on even bigger carved stone platforms. Hundreds of these Moai were found scattered on the island suggesting that the rival village settlements competed with each other by displaying the size and weight of their elaborate statues. But the resources were mainly consumed in the transportation of these stones. Research expert, Jo Anne Van Tilburg, said “50 to 70 people, working five hours per day and pulling the sled five yards at each pull could transport an averaged-sized twelve ton statue nine miles in a week”(Diamond, p. 101). Many resources in terms of food, water, and wood were lost in the transportation cycles of these statues. In the same way, the Mayans also needed to refocus their attention to problems in their society rather than their egos. Diamond makes the point that waging wars among rival kings and nobles along with erecting egotistical monuments out of competition led to their collapse. Diamond said, “the competition between kings and nobles that led to a chronic emphasis on war and erecting monuments rather than on solving underlying problems” contributed to the fall of Ancient Maya. The Polynesians actually focused their time on the essentials unlike the Mayans and the Easter islanders. The only thing is that they became to heavily dependent on trade with the surrounding islands. So when communication was lost, the islanders were helpless. More importantly, however, these cultures suffered from major deforestation. They cut down all the trees they had which led to the collapse of their cultures. Trees provide protection from major natural occurrences. So without trees or forests agricultural prosperity would decrease exponentially due to the lack of protection from the weather and other natural causes. Diamond makes a more direct note to the obliviousness of the leaders of the past societies when he says, “Maya kings sought to outdo each other with more and more impressive temples, reminiscent in turn of the extravagant conspicuous consumption by modern American CEOs. The passivity of Easter Chiefs and Maya kings in the face of the real big threats to their societies completes our list of disquieting parallels” (Diamond, p. 177).

Nowadays cultures are more focused on striving economically and prospering socially. Americans live by the cliché of the American Dream. Each person wants what is best for themselves and their families. People, instead of building statues and temples, go to school to learn in order to set themselves up for success in the future. Mankind also seeks to explore the area outside of the earth for future plans. Searching for other inhabitable places insures the future for humans because they need an outlet plan if the earth runs out of its resources. Although this plan seems impractical now based on our present day technology, it is a possible future plan that could potentially be necessary based on the amount of resources humans use and waste today.

Diamond addresses the idea that the earth can still run into the same problems that happened in the past to the island cultures. Although present day societies seem more educated, it remains very likely that collapse can happen today. Diamond’s most powerful idea is that some problems are “imperceptible”(Diamond, p. 424). Imperceptible problems can end societies because essentially it means that cannot be seen. Soil fertility was Diamond’s example. He said that the chemicals for soil fertility are unseen to the naked eye making it impossible for the island cultures to notice. Imperceptible problems can also be much more dangerous though. Diamond gives another present day example of an imperceptible problem, which is global warming. Global warming is a problem that humans just noticed because it has happened so gradually that was invisible. Seeing an insignificant year-to-year change is practically immeasurable but looking at a few decades worth of change surprises people. It surprises people based on Diamond’s idea of landscape amnesia. Landscape amnesia is when people do not recognize changes to the environment because the change is so subtle every year. So people let these environmental effects accumulate because they fail to notice what is going on.

Other potential problems simply cannot be fixed. Currently humans have no solution to the previously mentioned problem of global warming. They also have no future solution to the possibility that the earth may run out of natural resources. This fact contributes to Diamond’s idea that Easter Island could serve as a microcosm to the problems that can happen to the earth as a whole: “If thousands of Easter Islanders with jus stone tools and their own muscle power sufficed to destroy their environment and thereby their society, how can billions of people with metal tools and machine power now fail to do worse?”(Diamond, p. 119). The problem that the Easter Islanders ran into is the same problem that could happen to anyone. The idea is that “it is painfully difficult to decide whether to abandon some of one’s core values when they seem to be becoming incompatible with survival”(Diamond, p. 433). The Easter Islanders could not give up building these statues even though they depleted their resources, simply because the statues were too significant to their people. The quote means that humans at some point are going to have to sacrifice something they are so dependent on for the sake of survival, which can be very difficult and nearly impossible in some cases.

In conclusion, the Mayans and the island cultures of the past were both quite similar to and different from present day society. The differences lay in what they valued in society and culture. The Mayans and the Easter Island people competed among themselves by constructing aesthetically pleasing sculptures and temples to showoff their power and wealth. It was clear that their leaders cared more about how they looked socially rather than how the people were living economically because they utilized their resources poorly and failed to recognize the magnitude of their problems. The similarities lay in what could potentially happen the mankind in the future. The islands that collapsed served as small examples of what could potentially happen globally if current leaders fail to address problematic issues. Citizens of the world currently act in the same way that the island cultures did. People in power positions continue to act greedy instead of using their wealth and power to maintain prosperity. In the same way that powerful Mayan Kings wasted time, effort, and resources building elaborate temples, wealthy Americans waste the same things on their houses, cars, and miscellaneous expensive products. This type of greedy attitude is the same thing that lead to the collapse of the island cultures and if it is not changed Diamond believes that the same thing could happen to Americans and humans worldwide. Diamond notes that many hazardous problems are difficult to notice and that some of them even if noticed are impossible to fix. Without recognition and solution of future problems, the Earth could collapse just like the microcosmic island cultures.