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The Future Collapse of the World

Often the idea “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” seems to ring true. The world today pays more attention to environmental and social problems than was true in the past. The world documents and publicizes unrest in countries and many countries have enacted environmental protection legislation. I think Jared Diamond, author of Collapse, would not agree with the quote. He would think the state of the world is very much similar to the past – societies in the world operate similar to how past societies have in the face of collapse. Conversely, I think we do things differently than in the past. Much of the world, along with all of the scientific community, recognizes environmental problems – unlike the past civilization of the people of Easter Island – and there are attempts to prevent them, but the solutions are too slow to take hold to prevent current and future problems. The world recognizes political problems and does what the majority believe is right, yet political unrest still occurs, and isolates the world from its neighbors even more. The world recognizes and tries to prevent mistakes early, unlike past civilizations, yet I believe societal collapse will occur because the actions taken to prevent mistakes are not timely and fail.

Jared Diamond isolates five reasons as to why societies would collapse. They are: environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, decreased support from neighbors, and society’s response to the problem. Environmental damage is damage “people inadvertently inflict on their environment” and the extent of that damage is based on the “resilience of an area’s forests, its soils, its fish populations, and so on” (11). Climate change with environmental damage has “proved fatal” (13). It is difficult for hostile neighbors to destroy a society by themselves; rather, it weakens the society and allows for other factors to destroy the society, such as environmental damage. Decreased support from neighbors can lead to a collapse if a society is only able to survive based on trade. The society’s response to the problems is the most important factor, because if a society completely ignores or misses an important problem or does not react timely or effectively, its demise is inevitable.

Past societies like the people on Easter Island, the islands of Pitcarin, Mangareva, and Henderson, and the Mayans all collapsed. The society of Easter Island collapsed due to environmental damage and the people’s response to the problem. Deforestation of the island led to no protection from the wind. Topsoil blew away and no plants could grow well. Without access to food, the civilization died. The society did not perceive the problem until there was no way to respond effectively. They were unable to trade with other islands, because they lacked the supplies – trees to build boats, and they could not trade with other people on the island, because all of the tribes succumbed to deforestation. The islands of Pitcarin, Mangareva, and Henderson all collapsed because of decreased support from neighbors. The islands traded with each other, but once Mangareva collapsed, the other islands slowly followed. The smaller islands could not support themselves independently without trade. As Diamond says, “thus, environmental damage, leading to social and political chaos and to loss of timber for canoes, ended Southeast Polynesia’s interisland trade” (133). The Mayans collapsed due to climate change, environmental problems, and hostile neighbors. The Mayans reached their tipping point when they experienced deforestation and erosion and could not grow enough food for their overpopulated society. All of Diamond’s reasons for a collapse explain why past societies have collapsed, so it makes sense to apply these reasons to today’s society.

When Diamond writes about values, he says we must make “decisions about values,” meaning we must recognize all there is to value and then determine what should be valued highest. The tribes of Easter Island valued dominance over other tribes on Easter Island and to do so, they cut down all of the trees. Unfortunately, the people of Easter Island did not recognize a means to obtain food as something to value over tribal dominance and they fell victim to deforestation and an inability to grow and trade food. The Mayans valued the freedom of “individual reproductive choice,” unlike present day China, over overpopulation which eventually led to an inability to keep fertile land to house people and to grow food (524).

Much of the world recognizes environmental destruction and measures have been made to prevent destruction. The Kyoto Protocol was enacted over ten years ago by many of the countries that emit the greatest amounts of carbon dioxide. Of those who have signed the treaty, many have vowed to decrease emissions. However, it is unsure as to what help the treaty may do to deter an advancement of environmental destruction. Even if people do not believe in global warming, other known environmental problems like deforestation, overfishing, and pollution are undeniable, yet they still occur even though the world knows they are bad. Such problems lead to a decrease in biodiversity; many species are close to extinction and many are losing essentials for living from climate change. Even natural disasters destroy societies. For example, Sri Lanka, Haiti, and New Orleans are all societies still trying to rebuild from relatively recent natural disasters. Even though we know such problems exist, and there are plans to decrease the magnitude of the problems, there is no definite chance to eliminate all problems. Since an environmental collapse will occur to the world and not to an isolated society such as Easter Island or the Mayans, the complete collapse will take much longer than it took for other individual societies to collapse.

Both political and social problems will exist forever, because there will never be a perfect, utopian society. Although the problems will forever exist, it is unsure if these problems will lead to a complete societal collapse. Even if the collapse were to occur, inherently, the society would just rebuild itself better than before by not doing the wrong that caused it to collapse. If a collapse occurs, there are four simple reasons, says Diamond, to the failure. First, the society does not anticipate the problems timely. This is true now, for most societal problems are not known until there is an uprising or an attack on another society. Preemption of further attacks sometimes works, but it is costly and not time-effective. Money, people, and time could rather be spent on helping create a new, better society. Second, the society does not perceive problems as they become evident. There is no way to determine the magnitude of the problem or when the next one will occur. Societal problems occur often and do not lead to a collapse, so it is difficult to determine which ones will lead to a collapse. Third, once the society realizes problems, it does not try to solve them, for they do not know how to solve the problems or the extent of the problems. Fourth, the society could try to solve the problems, but the solution could fail. The tragedy of the commons could occur, but a society could find a way to continue without the sought after resources.

Although we do many things differently than in the past, I believe the world will eventually collapse, but not in the next hundred years, rather in the thousands to hundreds of thousands of years. I think it is more probable that the world will collapse through environmental damage or climate change than political or social problems. The world’s primary focus should be on environmental damage since it can lead to political problems. Environmental damage could lead to scarce resources, and trade wars would occur wherein countries would fight each other for resources. The probability that the world would collapse from political problems is very low, because it seems that the only chance the world would collapse from political problems is through nuclear warfare. All other problems could be discussed through diplomatic means. In the past, problems were not noticed until they were too late, but today potential problems are widely publicized through social networks and news sources, which would greatly delay a collapse. Also, if one country our culture becomes close to a collapse, other countries will help to prolong survival. Many problems from the past still exist today – deforestation, erosion, overpopulation – which caused a collapse and if not effectively prevented, they could also help lead to the world’s collapse. It seems that Diamond’s most important factor is the last one - society’s response to the problem. If society responds incorrectly, too slowly, or ineffectively to a problem, then time has been wasted to prevent the problem, and collapse is very much closer to occurring.

Diamond warns of “making painful decisions about values” (523). Now, the United States must make decision about our want for complete freedom or government control over some of our lives to protect us from potential dangers. Less personal freedom could allow for greater national security. The idea of valuing things in life which are deemed as natural rights is difficult, because there is no way to measure one above the other. Many values are mutually exclusive such that even if we were to value freedom over protection of life, we may be closer to a collapse than if we were to value protection of life over freedom, but it is difficult to figure out which is closer to being true. But, this does not change my opinion on if we can learn from the past. I think, regardless, a collapse will occur, but the extent to which values will be given up will prolong the time before the collapse. Diamond says that since countries like Finland, Iceland, and Britain were able to make “reappraisals of values…despite being agonizingly difficult…they contribute to my hope” (524).

Diamond would not agree that “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” The world can still succumb to a collapse similar to Easter Island, Pitcarin, and the Mayan culture. Diamond isolates five ways as to how this can happen and four more ways as to how the world continues the problems of the past. Although societies in the past have failed, the world has new ways to prevent failure – like the media – to warn against problems and how to put off any damage to the society. The world also has changed values to prolong societies, unlike the past, so that they do not collapse which gives Diamond hope.

Bibliography

Diamond, Jared. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.