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Most people would agree that the socio-political and ecological climate of the world is very different from that of 10th century Mexico or even the 17th century Pacific. It is undoubtedly true that modern societies are vastly different from those of the Easter Islanders or the Classic Maya for example. Can modern peoples compare to these peoples of the past at all? Can we learn from their mistakes? This is a fundamental question in Jared Diamond’s “Collapse.” A reading of Diamond could depict a hapless 21st century as the “train-wreck one just cannot look away from.” Even with lessons from the past collapses humans are still on a road to catastrophe, particularly of an ecological variation. Though moderns can interpret climatological phenomena, it appears that even with this knowledge it is very difficult to stay off the crash course to collapse.

The term collapse can be defined or understood in a few different ways. After all, there are recessions, and depressions yet these are not collapses. For example, after the stock market crash of 1929; America plummeted into the Great Depression, but society rebounded preventing collapse. To answer this Jared Diamond defines collapse as, “a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity over a considerable area, for an extended time” (Diamond pg.3), Though it is difficult to define just when a society’s decline becomes a collapse, suffice it to say that a collapse is a terrifyingly major occurrence. Diamond’s “five-point framework” lists factors that contribute to collapse: environmental damage people inflict on their own environment, climate change – natural or otherwise-, hostile neighbors, decreased support by friendly neighbors, and finally societies response to its problems. (Diamond pgs. 11-14). Through these identifiers a comparison between modern societies and those of the past is made possible.

The first of the collapsed societies that merits study is the Easter Islanders. Their society crumbled largely on account of ecological damage and poor reaction to the changes they inflicted on their home. The most significant of these was extreme deforestation, which caused a chain reaction of ecological disasters. Easter Island did not have many trees to begin with. The rapid nature of deforestation described by Diamond is alarming, “forest clearance began soon after human arrival, reached its peak around 1400, and was virtually complete by dates that varied locally between the early 1400s and the 1600s” (Diamond pg. 107). The weight of this can be seen in the abundance of bird species, “Of the 25 or more formerly breeding seabirds, overharvesting and rat predation brought the result that 24 no longer breed on Easter itself...” (Diamond pg. 106). The lack of birds also signifies the lack of one major food source. Given what is known about the current conditions of Easter Island one must ask, why did they cut these trees down at all, or how did things get so bad? The answer to the first may lie in the famous Easter Island statues. To move the stone that built the statues the Islanders required rope made from the fibrous tree bark. Ultimately, the statue building would not only cause severe deforestation, but it was also a tremendous waste of the most valuable resource, humans. The Easter Islanders were using all of their human and natural capital to make statues that were not helping them at all.

The Maya’s collapse also merits study and comparison largely because they are more similar to modern society in that they were not in utter isolation. The failure of the Classic Maya civilization stems from a multitude of causes including population growth, deforestation, increased warfare, and again inaction. The most important of these are war and droughts. Of Maya warfare Diamond writes, “We now know that Maya warfare was intense, chronic, and unresolvable” (Diamond, pg. 172). Drought too could have been a severe problem. This stemming mostly from climate changes, “around A.D. 760 there began the worst drought in the last 7,000 years, peaking around the year A.D. 800, and suspiciously associated with the Classic collapse” (Diamond, Pgs. 173-177). Needless to say the problem of being overly populated, contributed creating yet another endless cycle when it comes to drought. That is, the severity of drought was intensified by the overwhelming demand of enormous populations.

The inherent usefulness of studying past collapses is that which we can learn from them by comparison. We see in our own modern societies population problems, increased warfare, climate change, and most frighteningly inaction. The first of these is population growth, which affects all aspects of life because, “rising world population and affluence [lead] to increasing demand for decreasing supplies” (Diamond, pg. 479). While Diamond discussed the fishing industry in relation to this quotation, its application to other industries is obvious. The current spike in oil and food prices is at least in part a result of increased demand due to an overwhelmingly large population. The Earth’s climate too is rapidly changing, “Most knowledgeable scientists now agree that, despite year-to-year ups and downs of temperature...the atmosphere really has been undergoing an unusually rapid rise in temperature recently, and that human activities are the or a major cause” (Diamond, pg. 493). It is easy to write this off as a wonderful way to get rid of winter, but there are serious implications.[[1]](#footnote-1) These include crop yield shortages, and deadly flooding. Another serious problem is that of conflict. It is hard to think of an area in the world without war, and if there is no war there is certainly tension! War is the worst part of a society. It signifies the severe waste of the most precious resource, human life, in addition to economic costs. Even with this information we have yet to separate ourselves from other collapsed societies because we are doing nothing.

The ways in which moderns and ancients differ are both positive and negative. For one we have the destructive forces of technology. Diamond suggests that if ancient peoples could destroy their world with only sticks and stones, won’t we be able to ruin our world much more easily with steel, and power tools? Another major difference is that various nations, climates, regions are interconnected in a way past humans simply have not been. This means, for example, that what China does to the air will affect the very air that Americans breathe and vice versa. To our advantage we have one of the most excellent resources: knowledge, derived from history. With evidence of the past collapses, moderns can analyze the destruction of their deforestation, incessant warfare, population growth and other factors to conclude that there must be change.

If there is no change humans could face a bleak future. “at current rates most or all of the dozen major sets of environmental problems discussed at the beginning of this chapter will become acute within the lifetime of young adults now alive” (Diamond, pg. 513). Two currents of human thought in response to this are either Malthusian or Cornucopian. The Malthusians essentially suggest that there is an inevitable doom. On an uplifting, but no more helpful note the Cornucopians put forth the notion that in time due to economic factors, humans will find a solution to these problems.[[2]](#footnote-2) In response to this one of Diamond’s questions deals with finding new resources if we do in fact exhaust old ones. He answers saying, “Optimists who make such claims ignore the unforeseen difficulties and long transition times regularly involved.” (Diamond pg. 506). Surely, there would be difficulty in finding new resources, or innovations that might make human life more sustainable, but it is not impossible. These problems are serious, but they are not “insoluble” (Diamond, pg. 521). Towards the end of his book Diamond says, “I’m a cautious optimist” (Diamond, pg. 521).

Cautious optimism does come with a price, changes in the way various things are done, and perhaps even a change in basic ideals. Diamond raises the question, “Which of the values that formerly served a society well can continue to be maintained under new changed circumstances? Which of those treasured values must instead be jettisoned and replaced with different approaches?” (Diamond pg. 523). From our historical examples, it is clear that the Easter Islanders, would have been better served by giving up elements of their religious building, the stone monuments, and allocating their resources elsewhere. In modern society we have identified our problems that could lead to catastrophe, for example, population growth and climate change. Given climate change as an issue there are many adjustments that can be made to reach a solution. Among these are: research, implementation of clean energy, and lowering consumption. Are oil lobbies going to relinquish their posts and let governments give way to new sources of energy? More importantly, can Americans give up driving SUVs and fuel inefficient cars? Are we willing to slow our lives down and walk down the street for a gallon of milk? Can we turn away from the convenience that has shaped our society, where the major innovation of Apple’s iPad 2 is a start-up time that saves four seconds? My conclusion is that our mindset would have to change dramatically to reduce our consumption. I feel that I could consume less, but I cannot speak for all people. The problem of population growth is more challenging. Population growth can be stopped if people are forced to stop having children. Is this an actual possibility though? What right does say a government have on mandating familial decisions? How do lawmakers make the appropriate decisions regarding the numbers of children people should have? The list of questions goes on, and the answers are no less difficult to reach. I feel that any measure related to population control is fundamentally anti-liberty and by extension possibly even un-American. Does future society necessitate our culture to give up what we cherish? The case of the Easter Islanders forces me to say yes. When faced with sacrificing my culture, my way of life; however, I am drawn to say no perhaps destroying the hope of future generations.

Societal collapse could indeed be a horrifying reality for those who are too willing to write off what has happened by saying, “The past is a foreign country they do things differently there.” We are faced with choices whose effects may very well mean the continuation or the decimation of humanity. In many cases, the choice forces the decision maker between a rock and a hard place. An aspiring historian must hope that human kind will learn from the past, find some way to act decisively by reconciling making hard decisions with the future of humanity, and thus stop catastrophe.

1. In fact, it is actually severe weather that is more likely, including much colder temperatures in addition to general global rise in temperature. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cass, Loren. Personal interview. 23 Feb. 2011. Professor Cass, also suggested that in his view that a multilateral climate agreement is very difficult if not impossible to come by. Suggesting, disaster for the environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)