Kylee Sullivan

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**Avoiding Disaster: Why Societies Collapse**

Just like individuals, societies as a whole have trouble with both learning from their mistakes and correcting them. Unfortunately, in order to succeed in the world, societies must acknowledge and fix their mistakes. The root of the majority of societies’ problems lies is their inability to alter their values to systematically decrease the harmful impact they have on the environment. In his book, *Collapse*, author Jared Diamond describes both contemporary and ancient societies that have failed to survive throughout time. Diamond attributes these societal collapses to four separate situations. These four factors are: hostile neighbors, environmental destruction, decreased support by friendly neighbors, and the society’s response to its problems. In civilizations such as ancient Maya, Easter Island, the Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, and today’s societies, these four factors are common threads that connect each culture. Although current society appears to be a lot more advanced than past societies, when it comes down to it, the way people live today is similar to the way people of the past lived. As a result of not improving contemporary values and not learning from peoples’ past mistakes, today’s societies are at a risk for collapsing just like the civilizations of the past considered in *Collapse*.

One of the most commonly studied collapsed ancient civilizations is that of the Mayas. The Mayas were a logically advanced society in the areas of astronomy and calendar predictions; however they never considered how to act accordingly in order to maintain a successful society in the future. They abused the land they lived off of to the point where it was difficult to maintain life. *Collapse* author, Jared Diamond states, that in Mexico during the time of the Mayas, “calculation suggests that most of the felled pine trees were being burned for fuel, while the rest were used for construction or for making plaster…the Maya went overboard in lavish use of thick plaster on buildings, plaster production may have been a major cause of deforestation” (169). The lifestyles of the Mayas created man-made droughts as a result of deforestation which decreased the amount of rainfall in the area. Not only did the Maya civilization come to its demise as a result of a combination of deforestation and unpredictable rainfall, but also because of the preexisting environmental conditions of Mexico. It was difficult to successfully grow crops because of seasonal hurricanes and droughts. With time, erosion, in cities like Copan, occurred as a result of deforestation making the amount of plant wildlife greatly decrease. Nonetheless, the Mayas did not institute any protective measures in an attempt to save the environment they were slowly, but surely destroying.

War and conflict also contributed to the collapse of Maya, states Diamond: “Maya warfare was intense, chronic, and unresolvable, because limitations of food supply and transportation made it impossible for any Maya principality to unite the whole region in an empire” (172). With these factors combined, classic Maya society experienced a downfall. In the end, “…the disappearance of between 90 and 99% of the Maya population after A.D. 800…and the disappearance of kings, Long Count calendars, and other complex political and cultural institutions” effected the collapse of the Maya civilization (172).

Preexisting conditions of the Polynesian Easter Island, in addition to the lifestyle of the people who inhabited the island, are the reasons for its collapse of society. For instance, the island is not blessed with ideal climate conditions for helping a society survive and flourish. Diamond describes the island as having a “…windy, cool, dry climate…” (92) with “fresh water supplies [that were] limited…”(86). Because of the climate, many crops that were popular and vital to Polynesian culture could not be grown on Easter Island. However, not only did the island lack important plant-life to human survival, but also as Diamond states, “many of [the] 21 vanished species besides the palm would have been valuable to the islanders” (104). The people of Easter Island destroyed many plants while living on the island that contributed to the downfall of civilization. There was large-scale deforestation on the island as a result of the Polynesian’s lifestyle as well as the preexisting conditions of the island such as the island being old volcanic, small, and isolated with a cold high-latitude and lack of moisture. The main reason for the destruction of important resources on the island was the building of large-scale statues that each clan on the island built in competition with one another.

Diamond discusses that these statues, also known as, moai, and their larges bases (ahu) were extremely important to each clan on Easter Island. Not only did the clans fight for the best stones to use as building material for the moai, but chiefs throughout time tried to make the best moai possible: “the increase in statue size with time suggests competition between rival chiefs commissioning the statues to outdo each other” (98). So much time, effort, and supplies went into building these statues that the intense manual labor meant the workers needed to be provided with more food in order to work to their full potential. The statues themselves and the apparatuses used to transport them contributed to the reduction of readily available natural resources on the island. Diamond states that because of the islanders’ lifestyle and dedication to building enormous statues, “immediate consequences for the islanders were losses of raw materials, losses of wild-caught foods, and decreased crop yields” (107). With a lack of resources on the island, the inhabitants resorted to cannibalism to survive. As the environment around them collapsed, so did the society the islanders created. Everything on the island became corrupt and eventually died out, as said by Diamond: “what had failed, in the twilight of Easter’s Polynesian society, was not only the old political ideology but also the old religion, which became discarded along with the chief’s power” (109).

The Pitcairn and Henderson Islands are made up of three small, isolated islands: Mangareva, Pitcairn, and Henderson. Although the preexisting conditions of the islands are not ideal for maintaining a successful society, if inhabitants were environmentally conscious, it would be possible to do so. Unfortunately, however, the Polynesians who lived on the islands took complete advantage of the natural resources they had. According to Diamond, out of all three of the islands “…the one capable of supporting by far the largest human population, and most abundantly endowed with natural resources important to humans, was Mangareva” (122). The islanders did not have the future in mind as they allowed themselves to destroy the natural resources on the islands which gave them the opportunity to live. Diamond states that “too many people, and too little food…” (132) lead to “…disastrous environmental changes on Mangareva and Pitcairn” (132). This created problems because the three islands were, to a certain extent, interdependent on each other.

There is proof that Mangareva, Pitcairn, and Henderson traded with one another because some islands were better equipped with specific resources used for different things. But as natural resources, including trees and other plant-life, fish, different types of building rocks, and other materials that were vital to sustain life became less available and less abundant, each island started to die off. Diamond describes this process by saying: “the populations of Mangareva, Pitcairn, and Henderson all inflicted heavy damage on their environments and destroyed many of the resources necessary for their own lives” (134). With the collapse of the other islands, and the fact that the islands were so separated from other civilizations, they were unable to enlist in other people’s help to prevent their societies from collapsing.

Similar to societies of the ancient Maya, the Easter Islands, and the Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, today’s societies are, slowly but surely, destroying the environment around them. Today, people allow and even encourage the destruction of certain natural resources to increase human chances of survival. As in the past, the environment is not perfectly set up to ensure societal success across the globe. Diamond states that, “all modern societies depend on extracting natural resources, both non-renewable resources (like oil and metals) and renewable ones (like wood and fish)…the economies of dozens of countries depend heavily on extractive industries” (441). Most people in prospering First World countries have a lack of regard for the well-being of the environment as long as they are able to live comfortably off of it. Three major industries with which people today are harming themselves by harming the environment are: the hardrock mining industry, the logging , and the fishing industry. All three of these industries take away from the environment in a destructive way, whereas other industries (such as the oil mining industry) take away something that is not necessarily vital to the stability of the natural world. Diamond states: “hence any logging or fishing, almost by definition, may cause environmental damage” (469). These industries- the hardrock mining industry, the logging industry, and the fishing industry- are all similar to the industries that past collapsed societies took advantage of in order to survive. One would think that, with all of our knowledge of the collapses of past civilizations, people today would avoid similar ways of life. However, just like the collapsed societies of ancient Maya, the Easter Island, and the Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, societies today do not think far advanced in the future in terms of what permanent affects their lifestyles will have on the environment and the world as a whole. As a result, today’s societies are at risk of collapsing just like societies have in the past.

Societies today are unwilling to change popular values and habits in order to decrease the harmful effects they have on the world. Diamond states in his book: “I already mentioned the seeming political impossibility of inducing First World citizens to lower their impact on the world. But the alternative, continuing our current impact, is more impossible” (524). People refuse to ‘revert’ back to the past and stop using the technology and benefits known to mankind today in order to ensure a better future. However, it people were to think of new, alternative ways in which they can still take advantage of today’s technology but at the same time use it to protect the world than societies would be less likely to collapse. Diamond preaches that “we have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of distant peoples and past peoples” because of such advances like the television; people just have yet to take advantage of what is right in front of them (524).

All societies have certain characteristics that, when combined, can lead to disaster. The disaster that can result from things such as hostile neighbors, environmental destruction, decreased support by friendly neighbors, and the society’s response to its problems, is a societal collapse. Many societies in the past have fallen victim to collapse including the ancient Maya, Easter Island, and the Pitcairn and Henderson Islands. Author Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*, presents different societies who collapsed and portrays the reasons that led to their collapse. Even with all these past examples of societies that failed in the long run, societies today are not making the proper lifestyle adjustments to ensure that factors such as hostile neighbors, environmental destruction, decreased support by friendly neighbors, and the society’s response to its problems will not increase the risk of societal collapse. The world would benefit if today’s societies used technology to their advantage to decrease their harmful impact on the environment. However, people fail to acknowledge and learn from the mistakes of past societies and, as a result, no modern society is safe from the possibility of collapse. If societies used the technology available to them today to change their behavior to benefit the world, then they would be less likely to collapse.

**Works’ Cited**

Diamond, Jared. *Collapse*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.