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Collapse: The Fate of the Modern World?

In his book “Collapse,” Jared Diamond writes about several civilizations throughout history that experienced total collapses in the face of social, economic, and political problems. These societies ranged from the peoples of Rano Raraku on Easter Island, to the Pacific Islanders of the Pitcairn Islands, to the Classic Mayans of Central America. The societies, some ancient, some not, all suffered similar fates: the total collapse of their culture and their way of life. From studying their societies, Diamond tells how they fell, and what issues plagued them until their ultimate demise. In the final chapters of the book, Diamond outlines the troubles facing our world today, and what could be done to prevent a catastrophic collapse experienced by the Easter Islanders and the Mayans. Diamond calls on history to serve as a reminder of what could happen if we continue down a path of environmental destruction and over-population. He would therefore disagree with the quote from L.P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*: “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Diamond argues, and I agree, that there are lessons to be learned from history, and that we cannot ignore the problems that caused the collapse in the societies. The mistaken choices, problems and issues that are out of human control that led to the collapse of past civilizations can happen again if we are not conscious of history.

While the same basic problems afflicted each civilization and contributed to the overall collapse, each ancient civilization we studied in Diamond’s *Collapse* represents a

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main issue that was the primary cause of their downfall. The Mayans suffered droughts and agricultural problems similar to those encountered by the Easter Islanders and the Polynesians of the Pitcairn Islands; however, a major problem of the Mayans was the endless wars between principalities that distracted them from environmental issues. On Rano Raraku, the Easter Islanders were relatively peaceful, and military endeavors were a contributor to the decay of their society. Instead, their collapse can be primarily attributed to the deforestation and exploitation of the resources on their island. In a classic case of overpopulation, the Easter Islanders could no longer support their growing population, as resources on the island ran out, many died and the civilization collapsed, never to rise again. On the Pitcairn Islands in the southeastern Pacific Ocean, the society also suffered from the affects of overpopulation, exhaustion of resources, and war. (Diamond 120) The original inhabitants thought the island's resources were inexhaustible; they than began to overpopulate, and their resources dwindled. (Diamond 120) Trade with the other islands failed, as each island was focused inwards on its own problems. (Diamond 120) In some cases, the islanders turned to cannibalism just to stay alive. Today, around 50 people inhabit the Pitcairn Islands, and all of them are descendants of the sailors of the HMS *Bounty* who rediscovered the island in 1790. (Diamond 123)

From these three civilizations, one can understand the major issues that led to the total collapse of a society, among them are: over-population, exhaustion of resources, and war leading to a lack of desire to solve economic, social, and environmental problems.

In the erstwhile civilizations of the Pitcairn Islands, Easter Island, and Central America, the people suffered from many of the same issues that the modern world suffers from today. Specifically the issues are different, however they are basically the same. The

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seemingly natural flaw of humanity to wage war upon each other has been a major factor in the total collapse of several civilizations. This natural flaw is something that we as humans must work very hard to overcome, for if we do not overcome it, the moral failure may be a threat to our continued existence. It has also been the culprit in the fall of many great cultures, including the Roman Empire and the German Empire of the 19th and early 20th century. The expansionist policies enveloped both empires in a warlike nature that contributed greatly to their eventual demise. For example, a major fault of the Mayans was centered around their warlike nature, which “led to a chronic emphasis on war and erecting monuments.” (Diamond 160) This cultural obsession with competition caused the Mayans to focus on war “rather than on solving underlying problems.” (Diamond 160) Modern nations during the Cold War focused on creating nuclear weapons to wield against their enemies in an arms race that left the economy of the Soviet Union reeling in a recession that continues to plague former Soviet states today. The build up of weapons persisted, and there was little thought on the fact that the environment was being harmed in the manufacturing of weapons. Fortunately, there has not been a world war in almost 70 years, and nations with nuclear capabilities have begun to reduce their arsenals and stockpiles of atomic weapons to prevent future catastrophes of war.

In the historical situations described in the last paragraph, all energy was being put into new ways to destroy our opponents in the Soviet Union and the Mayan kingdoms for example. The focus on science and creating “green” technology had not emerged because few were willing to work on new ideas and technologies that could prevent environmental damage. However, unlike the Mayans, who among other conflicts succumbed to endless wars, the modern world has turned from its previous path

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and has begun to care for the environment. New measures are being every day in an effort to protect the earth, and conserve vital resources. One of the major steps overtaken in preventing pollution started in the 1970s when scientists discovered that CFCs, which were being used in aerosols, were very dangerous to the ozone layer. Environmental groups around the world called for the “phasing out” of aerosols. However, the “\$200 billion value of CFC-based industrial efforts” proved very difficult to take down and completely remove. (Diamond 505) The major corporations producing CFCs protested vigorously, but in a major step for environmentalists everywhere, the environment took precedence over the economy, and governments everywhere began to order the halt to production and use of aerosols by 1995. Unfortunately, many Third World countries continue to use CFCs in aerosols and refrigerators, and the amount of CFCs already in the stratosphere will continue to break down the ozone layer. (Diamond 505) However, governments everywhere continue to implement more environmentally friendly ways of producing energy, and we have taken in a major step in protecting the environment from harm.

World population continues to rise, and it could double in 30 years at the earliest. (Diamond 494) In several Third World countries, growth is as high a 4% annually, which means that the populations in those countries are growing disproportionately compared to the rest of the world. In many countries, the number of young people at reproductive age is far greater than the number of older people and thus the population will continue to rise. (Diamond 494) More people in the world means that we will need more resources, and even at the world’s current population, they are beginning to dwindle. In several of the civilizations that collapsed, one of the main reasons was that they over-populated and

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exhausted all of their resources. The Easter Islanders and the Pitcairn Islanders overfished, which is an issue we face today, as a large number of the world's fisheries are being exhausted. (Diamond 484) From the past civilizations, readers can see that over-population is a critical issue that we cannot ignore. Indeed, the modern world has begun to take into account the possibility that our population could grow exponentially until the earth can no longer support us. Groups have been started to call for a halt to population growth, and the population of some countries, including Italy and Japan, have stagnant or even decreasing population. (Diamond 494) In this way, we have begun to stave off an increasing population, and may prevent the over-population of the world and the exhaustion of all of its resources.

We cannot ignore the past; if we do, we will repeat it. Humanity cannot be ignorant enough to think that history is irrelevant, and that what happened in the past cannot possibly happen to the modern world. Time and time again, we have seen that history tends to repeat itself. Another natural flaw of humans is to ignore the past and disregard its importance to the present. If there is any lesson to be taken from Diamond's book, the lesson that studying history to prevent a future collapse of our world is the one to be learned. L.P. Hartley's statement shows the ignorance of humans through a statement that tries to disassociate modern cultures with past ones. I agree with Diamond's optimistic view of the outcome of the modern world, we are no longer headed for a collapse, though if we lose sight of history, there may be serious consequences to our world. However, as the future cannot be played off the past, we must balance our knowledge of what has happened and attempt to move into the future with the past as our advisor, but not our guide.