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Mathematics Across Cultures

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Will History Repeat Itself?

The famous writer L.P. Hartley once said that, “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” In his work *Collapse*, Jared Diamond argues against this point. Using the great civilizations of the Mayans along with the ancient people of Easter and Pitcairn Islands, he expresses the view that the mistaken choices, obliviousness to signs of problems, and misfortunes that were out of human control led to the collapse of many powerful societies and could very easily happen to our own. It seems that many of the problems of the world today occur because people tend to assume that they will not make the same mistakes again, but nevertheless continue to do things the same way that they have always been done. However, there are several qualities about the cultures of today’s world that make them unique from past civilizations. These qualities make it less likely for a major collapse to happen again, but do not remove the possibility. Unlike the Mayans and the people of the Easter and Pitcairn Islands, modern culture has a better capacity to realize the problems that face it and still have enough time to make the changes that are necessary to keep our civilization from experiencing a collapse. The greatest question is whether or not we will learn from the mistakes of the past and take the steps to save our society before it is too late. Diamond writes, “For the first time in history, we face the risk of a global decline. But we also are the first to enjoy the opportunity of learning quickly from developments in societies anywhere else in the world today, and from what has unfolded in societies at any time in the past.” (Diamond, p. 23)

Jared Diamond suggests in *Collapse* that people tend to make many of same decisions that were made in the past and fail to learn from them. He says that there are five factors that contribute to the collapse of a society. These five factors are environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, loss of friendly trade partners, and society’s responses to its environmental problems. (Diamond, p. 11) Each of these factors is still relevant despite the numerous changes that the world has gone through since the fall of the great societies. While it is highly unlikely that the people of today would cut down every tree and face the consequences that were seen on Easter Island, environmental damage is a serious issue that could lead to a collapse. The second factor is climate change. This ties in greatly with environmental damage as what is done to the environment often affects the climate. An example of this is the global warming issue. Actions by humans are causing changes in the climate that are causing the average temperature of the Earth to rise. On the same note, Diamond’s fifth factor is society’s response to its environmental problems. For nearly half a century people have been noticing the effects of global warming and other environmental problems such as the depletion of natural resources but have not really taken any major steps towards solving them. While environmentalists have taken action to keep the planet as we know it, more people need to step up and act for change. More and more damage is being done every day and at some point it will be impossible to reverse the effects.

The third factor that Diamond introduces is hostile neighbors. Speaking globally, the earth does not have reason to fear an attack from other planets. However on a national scale there is reason to worry. While the immediate neighbors of the United States do not seem to be threatening, modern technology has essentially made all nations on the planet neighbors as travel is now all too easy. Numerous countries in the Middle East and Asia are not particularly fond of us and could pose a threat at some time in the future. While economic interests or political differences could be possible points of contention, environmental problems would probably be the cause of any hostility. The fourth factor is friendly trade partners. Not everything can be produced most efficiently within the United States making trade a necessity. However, should any hostility arise anywhere on the globe it could break our ties with certain trade partners and put us in an interesting position that would force us to provide everything for ourselves.

Over the course of the book, Diamond uses these five factors to explain the downfall of numerous past societies. A few that he focuses on are the people of the Easter and Pitcairn Islands as well as the great Mayan civilization. First he discusses Easter Island. This great society collapsed based on environmental damage as well as their response to the environmental problems that they faced. Deforestation was the cause of their destruction. For an island that was over 1200 miles from the nearest land, these people relied entirely on themselves. They essentially had no one to trade with, but at the same time had no reason to fear an attack from any other tribes. However, their isolation meant that as soon as the island was completely denuded of trees, the soil was no longer protected from the wind and could not produce a means for their survival. They could not grow crops, and the lack of wood prevented them from building enough boats to emigrate from the island. Instead of taking notice of the decreasing number of trees, the Easter Islanders continued to build their religious statues as they watched their society collapse all around them.

The second society that Diamond discusses is the people of the Pitcairn Islands. Their greatest problems were environmental damage as well as a loss of friendly trade partners. While these islands were abundant in resources, over time, overpopulation depleted them. They were no longer able to produce enough to support themselves and at the same time were unable to produce enough resources to trade. This led to a continuous state of civil war that destroyed a once thriving society. Cannibalism was the last option as the peoples of the Pitcairn Islands destroyed themselves. Eventually, their trade partners collapsed alongside them. (Diamond, p. 120) These people depended on imports from the Pitcairn Islands and once deprived of them, they destroyed their own environment until they met their inevitable fate.

The Mayan civilization was a third great society whose collapse Diamond emphasized. He suggests that their downfall was marked by environmental damage, climate change, and hostile neighbors. The Mayans are unique among prehistoric collapses as many of their records have survived. Although they are incomplete, they nonetheless provide more useful information than the assumptions archaeologists are forced to make regarding other ancient civilizations like the Easter and Pitcairn Islanders. Additionally, there are still people that speak Mayan languages and are aware of Mayan culture. They were also different from the cases considered before in that they were not isolated and were technologically advanced. (Diamond, pgs. 159-160) Much like the other civilizations, the Mayans brought part of their collapse upon themselves while doing damage to their environment in the form of deforestation and erosion. Climate changes caused droughts that also contributed. Most importantly, it seems that it was incompetence by their leaders that led to the downfall. Instead of trying to solve the contributing problems, the kings and nobles put too great of an emphasis on war and putting up monuments. The Mayans did not rely much on trade so this criterion could not have had much of an effect on their fall. Despite being such an advanced civilization that spanned over a large geographic area out of isolation, they were unable to take the necessary steps to prevent their collapse.

Diamond says, “The other crucial choice illuminated by the past involves the courage to make painful decisions about values.” (Diamond, p. 523) While some values can be maintained, many others may need to be replaced or at least approached differently. Though it is difficult to reassess these values, history shows that it has been done before leaving hope in a period of collapse that the world can make the necessary adjustments to survive. As far as making decisions about values, Diamond is referring to cultures making choices that may go against their customs. Some examples of choices that should have been made are that the people of Easter Island should have given up building their religious statues when all of the forestation was coming down around them. Also the Mayans should have stopped waging war with the neighboring tribes and putting up monuments until their environmental and economic issues were settled. Our society is facing some issues like these today. We need to stop overexploiting natural resources like oil and trees. We need to make changes in the way we travel to prevent more air pollution. We also need to make better choices to prevent further overpopulation. While these types of decisions can often be painful to make, they are still necessary. The past shows us that if we cannot change our values the risks are too great as it could lead to famine, war, and the Earth’s ultimate destruction.

Many of the choices and problems that led to the collapse of so many great ancient civilizations could easily happen again in the modern world. Diamond presents several factors that he thinks were directly responsible for the collapses of past civilizations and still face us today. (Diamond, p. 486) These environmental problems include deforestation, overfishing, overhunting, soil problems, energy problems, the release of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere and water, invasive species, and overpopulation. It seems that overpopulation is the greatest concern of all of these factors because it has an impact on almost everything, environmentally speaking. More people require more energy and resources to be used to support the large population. However environmental problems are not alone in causing a collapse. Economic and military decisions can still lead to a society’s downfall. Nonetheless, today’s world should be able to prevent a major collapse. The quality of communication between nations along with the ability that we have to learn from the past should be enough to preserve our culture. Steps can be taken to solve a problem long before it gets out of hand as people now know the consequences of many environmental problems like deforestation and general overuse of resources. While the globe may be in decline, we have time on our side to realize the problems and take the necessary steps to save the planet. We have been given an opportunity to learn from the past and not allow history to repeat itself.