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MONT102-N

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” (Hartley, 1) This quote, from L. P. Hartley’s “*The Go-Between*”, can be directly linked to the book *“Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed”* by Jared Diamond. It is a theme that is examined throughout the book, as Diamond gives points as to whether Hartley is correct in his assumption. Diamond examines societies that have collapsed in the past, and societies in similar situations that have succeeded. He tries to elaborate on why collapses occur to some and not to others. He does this through his five point framework to collapse. This list includes; “People’s damage to the environment, climate change, hostile neighbors, decreased support by friendly neighbors and society’s response to its problems.” (Diamond, p. 11) Diamond maintains throughout the book that he tries to stay on “middle ground” and not be bias in anyway. In regards to Hartley’s quote however, I believe that Diamond would disagree with the suggestion that the past is a foreign country. Sure the past is different from the present, but a lot of the problems that led to collapses are still affecting societies today.

Diamond suggests that we should learn from these past problems to ensure that we change our ways to avoid devastation. He says, “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) In other words, Diamond is stating that as a global society we are in jeopardy of a devastating collapse if we do not learn from the mistakes of past societies and change our ways. In this way, Diamond is disagreeing with Hartley’s quote. In no way does he suggest that the past does not bare any similarities to the present. Instead, he insists that we as a global society must learn from past mistakes that societies have made that ultimately led to their collapse. In contradiction to Hartley’s quote, Diamond even goes as far as to say there is a reason for optimism if we are not ignorant to the past. He says, “The other crucial choice illuminated by the past involves the courage to make painful decisions about values.” (Diamond, 523) This quote insinuates that there may be a time where we have to adapt to a problem that comes our way for the betterment of society even if it is difficult. I agree with Diamond in his proposition. When looking back at a few societies that were highlighted in the book, their success at overcoming a possible collapse depended a lot on their ability to adapt and change their ways for the betterment of their society. This is illustrated in a comparison between the habitants of Tikopia Island and the Norse in Greenland. “The Greenland Norse refused to jettison part of their identity as a European, Christian, pastoral society, and they died as a result. In contrast, Tikopian Islanders did have the courage to eliminate their ecologically destructive pigs, even though pigs are the sole large domestic animal and a principal status symbol of Melanesian societies.” (Diamond, p. 523-524) I believe this to be a key factor in the success of rapid decline of a society. The people of Tikopia put aside their values for the betterment of their society. Either they would keep the pig, a key figure to them, and allow them to further cause ecological harm, or choose to go against their values and eliminate the pig from the island. They did the second and as a result, were able to keep their society afloat. On the other hand, the Norse in Greenland were too set in their culture and would not adapt to the ways of the Inuit. who also lived there, and ultimately collapsed. In my opinion, this is a major reason why some societies are able to flourish and others are not. When things are not going smoothly and a conflict arises, it is important to be able to adapt and overcome these problems.

The way the media is today allows us to know what is going on anywhere in the world very quickly and this luxury was not present during past collapses. We are kept up to date regarding problems even in Third World countries. An example of this is the genocide in Rwanda. I agree with Diamond’s assumption that there is a risk of global decline and that we are in a better position than societies of the past. I believe this to be the case because of globalization in the world today. Through the media, we are able to stay in touch with other countries and if needed be there to assist anyway that we can. This was evident with the tsunami that hit Japan a few years ago. Now we did not erase the devastation that the tsunami caused, but we did do our best to bring supplies and aid in their attempt to fix the effects the disaster left. This example demonstrates a reason for optimism in my opinion. When another country was in need due to a natural disaster, the media allowed us means to know instantly and a chance to provide support. In contrast to a past society that collapsed due mainly to ecological problems, such as Easter Island, the world was alerted to Japan’s devastation and therefore were able to help. Easter Island was an isolated society and as a result had to deal with any problems internally. In sum, I agree with Diamond about the fact that we are at risk of a global collapse, but due to globalization we have reason to be optimistic.

The debate on whether the past mistakes and choices that ultimately led to various societies collapsing can happen again is a prevalent theme that Diamond touches on throughout the book. He looks at what decisions were made that either caused a society to flourish or to fall. This is demonstrated in the case of the Maya in Central America. The Mayans were a very developed culture that maintained written records and were an advanced high civilization for their time. Diamond states, “From the perspective of our five-point framework for understanding societal collapses, the Maya illustrates four of our points. They did damage their environment, especially by deforestation and erosion. Climate changes (droughts) did contribute to the Maya collapse, probably repeatedly. Hostilities among the Maya themselves did play a large role. Finally, political/cultural factors, especially the competition among kings and nobles…” (Diamond, p. 159-160) These contributing factors can all be associated with our global society today. There are environmental issues, climate changes (i.e. global warming), hostilities and political factors that are putting our society in jeopardy. Diamond talks about one of these factors on his chapter about Rwanda. He recounts a devastating genocide that has haunted Rwanda for years. It has an extremely high population density and body count. Diamond states, “The scale of Rwanda’s genocide, measure in proportion to the total population killed, far exceeds that of Bangladesh and stands second only to Cambodia’s.” (Diamond, p. 313) What is happening in Rwanda falls directly under the category of hostilities in Diamond’s five-point framework for collapse. This is proving the point that the mistakes and choices that societies made in the past do have the ability to happen in the present. I think we must make a conscious effort in order to avoid these past mistakes. One example of this is one of our larger environmental problems today; global warming. This has become a problem in our global society that has been around for a while, but has just begun to surface over the past few years. Global warming has a negative effect on the environment and can start causing a climate change (i.e. icebergs melting). This may not seem like a big problem, but climate change is one of the five points on Diamond’s framework to collapse and we must work to ensure it does not become disastrous. This can be done through being environmentally aware. By cutting down on pollution from factories and cars we are on the road to improvement.

Diamond believes that there is a reason for hope through the knowledge we have of past collapses and the globalization of our world. These characteristics distinguish us from past societies that have collapsed and in a way make it less likely for us to collapse. He says, “Another basis for hope is the increasing diffusion of environmental thinking among the public around the world.” (Diamond, p. 522) Diamond is acknowledging that we, as a global society, are becoming more environmentally aware. Compared to past societies that did not know the effects they were causing to the environment, and ultimately their society, this is a big step in the right direction. Since we know the harmful effects we have on the environment we can act on these to correct them. I agree with Diamond that there is reason for optimism despite the challenges ahead of us. Diamond states, “Today the world no longer faces just the circumscribed risk of an Easter Island society or Maya homeland collapsing in isolation, without affecting the rest of the world.” (Diamond, p. 519) I believe this to be a reason for optimism because if a country or society is in trouble the rest of the world will be able to assist in any way that they can, which was impossible to do with past collapses. So in conclusion, there will be obstacles and conflicts that we must adapt to and overcome these troubles to avoid a global collapse.

Works Cited

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Hartley, L. P. *The Go-Between*. London: H. Hamilton, 1953. Print.