

COLLAPSE: HOW SOCIETIES CHOOSE TO FAIL OR SURVIVE

JARED DIAMOND, PENGUIN BOOKS, 2005: 575 PAGES

Following on from his influential study *Guns, Germs, and Steel. The Fates of Human Societies*, in his latest book Jared Diamond sets out a convincing explanation as to why throughout recorded history many human societies have collapsed. *Collapse* argues that over time past societies have contributed to their own destruction, by damaging their environments and failing to respond adequately to environmental problems of their own making.

Throughout history consistent themes emerge, albeit their significance varying from society to society. In a detailed study of various societies throughout time *Collapse* highlights five main themes to explain societal collapse: human impacts on the environment; climate change; a society's relations with its neighbors; a society's exposure to acts of other potentially hostile societies; and the importance of a society's response to its problems. This discussion in turn explores eight main recurring environmental problems to explain why some human societies and the ecosystems that support them have collapsed over time. These problems are deforestation and habitat destruction, soil problems (such as erosion, salinisation and soil fertility losses) water management problems, over hunting, over fishing, effects of introduced species on native animals, human population growth, and increased per capita impact of people. All environmental problems that confront societies today.

Divided into four parts *Collapse* puts forward this thesis by examining the experiences of a diverse range of societies throughout time. Part one of the book begins with the current environmental and economic problems of modern day Montana in the mid-western USA. Montana is put forward as a model for the contemporary environmental problems that confront the world. It is not suggested that Montana's environmental problems are anymore acute than elsewhere in the world. Montana is in fact one of the most pristine environments, in one of the least populated regions of the richest nation on earth. But even Montana is faced with many of the same challenges presented by the five themes of the book mentioned above.

Part two of the book then goes on to examine the collapse of six societies including Viking society in Greenland, the Maya Civilisation of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and adjacent parts of Central America, the Anasazi of what is current day New Mexico, Easter Island, Henderson Island and Pitcairn Island. It is argued that the failure of these past societies to solve the environmental problems they created or encountered contributed to their eventual collapse.

However, *Collapse* is more than just another historical study of ecological causes of the destruction of societies. *Collapse* readily acknowledges that several similar studies have been undertaken before, and the very detailed reference list for each chapter at the end of the book directs you to some of these studies. Instead what is significant about *Collapse* is that it also highlights how other societies throughout history have been successful in responding to the same challenges. Two contrasting types of approaches to solving environmental problems which Diamond terms the "bottom-up" approach and the "top-down approach" are highlighted. It is argued that the "bottom-up" approach to environmental management may be found in small societies occupying a small island or homeland. In some such societies, all of its inhabitants are familiar with the entire island, for example, and know that they are affected by developments throughout the island, and share a sense of identity and common interests with other inhabitants. Knowing they all benefit from sound environmental management people work together. Examples of such successful societies examined in *Collapse* are the New Guinea highlands and Tikopia Islands.

In contrast *Collapse* argues the "top-down approach" is more suited to large societies with centralized political organizations. One example which is examined at length is the forestry management practices of Tokugawa era Japan. This societies "top-down" environmental management approach is put forward as an explanation why Japan, with the highest population density of any first world country, still has more than 80% of its mountainous countryside covered in forests.

Part three of *Collapse* then goes on to explore some of the environmental problems faced by several societies today. Many of these problems are precisely the same problems that have faced the societies discussed earlier in the book. One such example is the recent Genocide in Rwanda. It is suggested that in part Malthusian population pressure explains the Rwandan genocide. Importantly *Collapse* does not argue that this is the only factor that lead to these terrible events, nor that population pressure per se automatically leads to genocide.

Problems confronting several other countries are also examined. In Australia for example how we have responded to environmental problems such as the productivity of soils, salinity, the impact of mining, the over exploitation of forestry, marine fisheries and freshwater fisheries resources etc all seem to follow a similar pattern to that of past societies discussed earlier in the book.

Throughout the book it is clear that many of the problems that have lead to the collapse of past societies can simply be explained by the decisions that societies

made or did not make about their environment. Often societies may have made this choice by default. Wading through the wealth of information presented to the reader (at times to much information), it may take some time for readers to realize that this is the point of the book. But in the end the book shows that societies over time have chosen whether or not to commit ecological suicide.

Having taken you to the point of despair, wondering why so many societies could have decided to commit ecological suicide, *Collapse* also offers hope. Once you realise that the collapse of many societies can be explained by the decisions they made or did not make with respect to their environment then learning from their experience it may be possible for us to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The remainder of the book then concludes by examining briefly how this might be achieved. Significantly the concluding chapter of the book recognizes the very important role of non-state actors such as business and NGO's in tackling environmental problems now and into the future, especially through partnerships such as the Forest Stewardship Council and the Marine Stewardship Council.

Collapse then may be regarded as a study of many things. It is of course a study of the ecological history of past societies and why some have collapsed and why others have flourished. More significantly it is also a historical study that sheds light on the meaning of sustainable development. Sustainable development and addressing many of our current global, regional and local environmental problems is very much about the choices societies and individuals make. Collapse is also therefore in part a blueprint for the future of our planet. Whether modern societies will go the same way as our ancestors will be very much determined by the choices we make or fail to make. As Diamond notes in his concluding remarks to the book "we have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of distant peoples and past peoples. That's an opportunity that no past society enjoyed to such a degree".

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