



Echoes of Our Past

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ABSTRACT

This article is a brief overview of *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond. In his book, the author makes a comparative argument about the effect human impact on the environment has on the success or failure of a civilization. He examines past and current societies using case studies to discuss social history, social change, and environmental impact.

The historical and scientific details packed into this book help to demystify ancient cultures including Easter Island, and his delivery invokes images of their lives. He solidifies his compelling argument by focusing on current world trade and environmental policies.

The Book

The sun heats abandoned monolithic human figures as they lay strewn over a heaving, treeless landscape. What was once a subtropical rainforest and habitat to the world's largest palm trees, which are now extinct, Easter Island is now only hospitable to grasses, sedges, low ferns, and shrubs. What could have caused such a dramatic change to the island's landscape? The devastation is attributed to gradual deforestation by the original inhabitants; clear cutting for gardens, for fuel, and for building materials (Diamond, 2005, pp.102-107). Easter Island's landscape and history hold critical lessons about the way humans exist on the earth, and how that existence may affect our survival.

Are we doomed to repeat the same mistakes as our predecessors or can we learn from them, before we have affected the face of the entire planet?

Jared Diamond (2005), a professor of Geography at the University of California, Los Angeles, California, (Biography, 2004) seeks to answer this question in his book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, as he explores the contributing factors that lead to the collapse of some of the most powerful societies in history, while also examining the effects of current societies that exist, in both developing and developed countries.

Beginning the project, Diamond (2005) admits to having “a naive idea that the book would just be about environmental damage” (p. 11). Realizing that he did not “know of any case in which a society’s collapse can be attributed solely to environmental damage: there are always other contributing factors” (p. 10) and acknowledging that “It’s not true that all societies are doomed to collapse because of environmental damage: in the past some societies did while others didn’t; the real question is why only some societies proved fragile, and what distinguished those that collapsed from those that didn’t” (p. 10).

These observations lead the author to create a five-point framework of potential contributing factors: 1) environmental damage, which is the damage that societies often unconsciously inflicted on the environment, 2) climate change, which although is currently related to global warming, there is a natural occurrence of temperature change to become hotter or colder, wetter or drier, which does not relate to human activity, 3) hostile neighbours, each society is at risk of warring neighbours, and environment can help a society hold out long enough to fend off their attackers or buckle from the effects of a weakened environment, 4) the lessened support of friendly trade partners, which focuses on the problems that arise from neighbouring enemies when there is a decline in support from allies, and 5) the individual society’s response to its environmental problems, which always proves to have the greatest effect (pp. 11-15).

With a background in physiology, biology and biogeography, Diamond (2005) has published over two hundred articles and has won numerous awards, including the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement (Biography, 2004). He is recognized for his “novel theories relating species extinction rates to habitat size [that have] helped give birth to the discipline of conservation biology” (Brown, 2009, para. 1).

His knowledge and experience are evident in his work, as he mingles science and history to create a vivid image of the lives of past civilizations. In doing so, he provides

a striking look into the parity between the life patterns of past societies and present societies. Beginning with an exploration of the state of Montana, United States, and its environmental and economic challenges (pp. 27-76), Diamond (2005) addresses how those challenges have been and continue to be affected by the past and present actions of the citizens and government.

Moving through an exploration of the social culture, surroundings, and general lives of the past societies, the author takes readers to ancient Polynesia (Diamond, 2005, pp. 79-135) the Anasazi of Southwestern United States (pp. 136-156), and the powerful Maya (pp. 157-177), before ending with the Greenland Norse (pp. 178-248). Combining his own depth of knowledge with the work of other experts, Diamond addresses the issues that lead to the collapse of a particular civilization, and also provides answers to puzzles of many of the cultures, such as the stone monoliths of Easter Island and the fate of its inhabitants, which have mystified many for centuries.

Diamond (2005) then compares the actions of past and present societies in Haiti and The Dominican Republic (pp. 329-357), before moving focus to Rwanda (pp. 311-328). These developing countries provide a sobering look at the cyclical relationship between social policies that lead to negative effects on the environment and the dramatic social consequences of those environmental effects, such as the population explosion in East Africa. Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in the world.

. . . the growing population [of Rwanda] was accommodated just by clearing forests and draining marshes to gain new farmland, shortening fallow periods, and trying to extract two or three consecutive crops from a field within a year. . . . Friends of mine who visited Rwanda in 1984 sensed an ecological disaster in the making. The whole country looked like a garden and banana plantation. Steep hills were being farmed right up to their crests. Even the most elementary measures that could have minimized soil erosion, such as terracing, plowing along contours rather than straight up and down hills, and providing some fallow cover of vegetation rather than leaving fields bare between crops, were not being practiced. (pp. 319, 320)

The resulting effects are visible on the landscape. The meagre grass in the pastures is grazed closely by livestock and erosion gullies carry muddied water from freshly stripped pastures (p. 311).

The practice of over-farming stripped the land, notes the author, creating a dire situation. An increasing number of people became impoverished, hungry, and desperate.

These factors, bolstered by land disputes, created the circumstances under which people of the region fell vulnerable to the ideas of radical leaders, which quickly fueled the 1994 genocide under the guise of religious differences (pp. 317-328).

Providing a particularly interesting and significant view of the potential issues developed countries may face in the future, Diamond (2005) focuses on Australia (pp. 378-416). A developed country, whose issues are not yet as acute as those seen in many developing countries like Haiti and Rwanda, and not at immediate risk of collapse, is facing issues including human-made droughts, water shortages, and salinization. If humans remain on the current path, the effects that are being seen in Australia have equally damaging potential. Australia's problems also put light on the fact that environmental issues do not only arise in countries with uneducated, impoverished populations and corrupt governments.

Diamond (2005) provides evidence from both past and present societies to urge readers to heed the lessons they present. He also encourages readers to see the hope and inspiration each provides regarding environmental management, sustainable living, and regulating population. Is history destined to repeat itself, or can we learn from our mistakes? If we are to learn from once thriving cultures that exacted their own demise, Diamond suggests we consider adapting a slower pace of life, and reducing our carbon footprint, and our chemical utilization. As humanity approaches a crossroads, and we contemplate whether or not to heed the advice of Diamond, we are faced with a critical question: Will we ensure that we do not blindly repeat history?

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References

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