

## COLLAPSE: *How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*

by Jared Diamond

New York: Viking, 2004. 575 pp. \$29.95

Dr. Diamond's new study of "how societies choose to fail or succeed" has received considerable attention, and deservedly so. He describes eight threats to traditional societies and twelve among modern societies. He details the process by which various well-known collapses occurred in Easter Island, Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, the Anasazi, Mayan civilization, Norse Greenland; and he touches upon others: Mycenaean Greece and Minoan Crete, the Harappan culture in south Asia, Angkor Wat. He describes only three success stories in the face of similar threats: upland New Guinea, Tokugawa Japan and Tikopia in the Pacific.

I would note (and Dr. Diamond observes in several instances) that the primary driver of the threats was the seventh one he lists: population growth, or the settlement of places too fragile to handle the numbers. And the success stories depended upon drastic population limitation. Diamond makes the point that such threats are not simply history. Collapses are occurring today, and the huge growth of populations and globalization means that a threat in one place can threaten all of us.

This book is important as an antidote to the unthinking confidence - at least until the present oil price scare - that our society is immune. He believes our current problems "are like time bombs with fuses of less than 50 years", and the only way to address them is with "long term planning and the willingness to reconsider core values" - in the U.S. case, the addiction to growth and conspicuous consumption. Dr. Diamond's style is readable and anecdotal; the book should be a boon for NPG members, and for their acquaintances who are open minded enough to reconsider their values.

But let Dr. Diamond speak for himself. The following pages were taken intact from the Prologue to his book.

- Lindsey Grant

The monumental ruins left behind by those past societies hold a romantic fascination for all of us. We marvel at them when as children we first learn of them through pictures. When we grow up, many of us plan vacations in order to experience them at firsthand as tourists. We feel drawn to their often spectacular and haunting beauty, and also to the mysteries that they pose. The scales of the ruins testify to the former wealth and power of their builders -- they boast "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" in Shelley's

words. Yet the builders vanished, abandoning the great structures that they had created at such effort. How could a society that was once so mighty end up collapsing? What were the fates of its individual citizens? -- did they move away, and (if so) why, or did they die there in some unpleasant way? Lurking behind this romantic mystery is the nagging thought: might such a fate eventually befall our own wealthy society? Will tourists someday stare mystified at the rusting hulks of New York's skyscrapers, much as we stare

today at the jungle-overgrown ruins of Maya cities?

It has long been suspected that many of those mysterious abandonments were at least partly triggered by ecological problems: people inadvertently destroying the environmental resources on which their societies depended. This suspicion of unintended ecological suicide -- ecocide -- has been confirmed by discoveries made in recent decades by archaeologists, climatologists, historians, paleontologists, and palynologists (pollen scientists). The processes through which past societies have undermined themselves by damaging their environments fall into eight categories, whose relative importance differs from case to case: deforestation and habitat destruction, soil problems (erosion, salinization, and soil fertility losses), water management problems, overhunting, overfishing, effects of introduced species on native species, human population growth, and increased per capita impact of people.

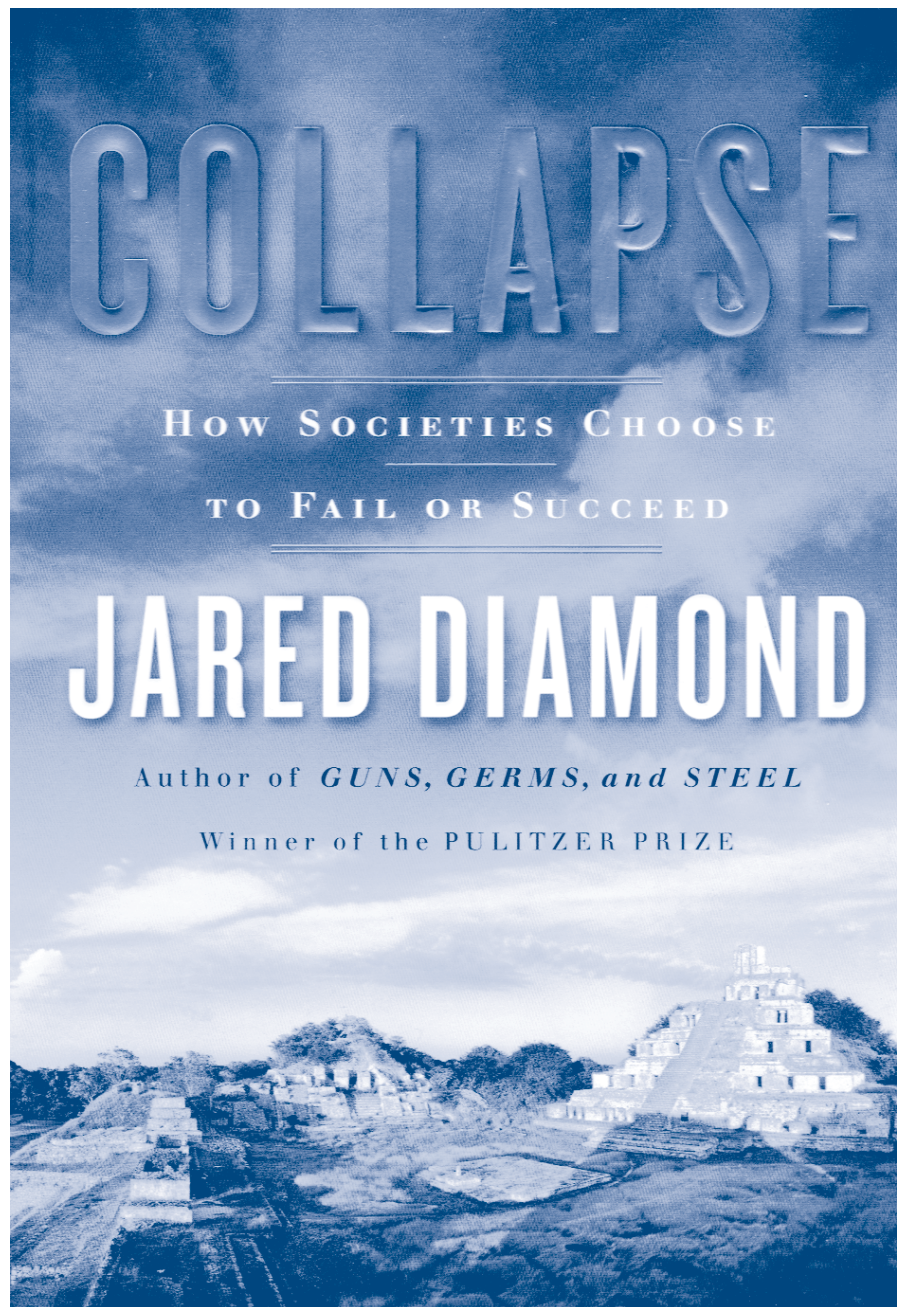
Those past collapses tended to follow somewhat similar courses constituting variations on a theme. Population growth forced people to adopt intensified means of agricultural production (such as irrigation, double-cropping, or terracing), and to expand farming from the prime lands first chosen onto more marginal land, in order to feed the growing number of hungry mouths. Unsustainable practices led to environmental damage of one or more of the eight types just listed, resulting in agriculturally marginal lands having to be abandoned again. Consequences for society included food shortages, starvation, wars among too many people fighting for too few resources, and overthrows of governing elites by disillusioned masses. Eventually, population decreased through starvation, war, or dis-

ease, and society lost some of the political, economic, and cultural complexity that it had developed at its peak. Writers find it tempting to draw analogies between those trajectories of human societies and the trajectories of individual human lives -- to talk of a society's birth, growth, peak, senescence, and death -- and to assume that the long period of senescence that most of us traverse between our peak years and our deaths also applies to societies. But that metaphor proves erroneous for many past societies (and for the modern Soviet Union): they declined rapidly after reaching peak numbers and power, and those rapid declines must have come as a surprise and shock to their citizens. In the worst cases of complete collapse, everybody in the society emigrated or died. Obviously, though, this grim trajectory is not one that all past societies followed unvaryingly to completion: different societies collapsed to different degrees and in somewhat different ways, while many societies didn't collapse at all.

The risk of such collapses today is now a matter of increasing concern; indeed, collapses have already materialized for Somalia, Rwanda, and some other Third World countries. Many people fear that ecocide has now come to overshadow nuclear war and emerging diseases as a threat to global civilization. The environmental problems facing us today include the same eight that undermined past societies, plus four new ones: human-caused climate change, buildup of toxic chemicals in the environment, energy shortages, and full human utilization of the Earth's photosynthetic capacity. Most of these 12 threats, it is claimed, will become globally critical within the next few decades: either we solve the problems by then, or the problems will undermine not just Somalia but also First World societies. Much more likely than a doomsday scenario involv-

ing human extinction or an apocalyptic collapse of industrial civilization would be "just" a future of significantly lower living standards, chronically higher risks, and the undermining of what we now consider some of our key values. Such a collapse could assume various forms, such as the worldwide spread of diseases or else of wars, triggered ultimately by scarcity of environmental resources. If this reasoning is correct, then our efforts today will determine the state of the world in which the current generation of children and young adults lives out their middle and late years.

But the seriousness of these current environmental problems is vigorously debated. Are the risks greatly exaggerated, or conversely are they underestimated? Does it stand to reason that today's human population of almost seven billion, with our potent modern technology, is causing our environment to crumble globally at a much more rapid rate than a mere few million people with stone and wooden tools already made it crumble locally in the past? Will modern technology solve our problems, or is it creating new problems faster than it solves old ones? When we deplete one resource (e.g., wood, oil, or ocean fish), can we count on being able to substitute some new resource (e.g., plastics, wind and solar energy, or farmed fish)? Isn't the rate of human population growth declining, such that we're already on course for the world's population to level off



at some manageable number of people?

All of these questions illustrate why those famous collapses of past civilizations have taken on more meaning than just that of a romantic mystery. Perhaps there are some practical lessons that we could learn from all those past collapses. We know that some past societies collapsed while others didn't: what made certain societies especially vulnerable? What, exactly, were the processes by which past societies committed ecocide?

Why did some past societies fail to see the messes that they were getting into, and that (one would think in retrospect) must have been obvious? Which were the solutions that succeeded in the past? If we could answer these questions, we might be able to identify which societies are now most at risk, and what measures could best help them, without waiting for more Somalia-like collapses.

But there are also differences between the modern world and its problems, and those past societies and their problems. We should not be so naïve as to think that study of the past will yield simple solutions, directly transferable to our societies today. We differ from past societies in some respects that put us at

lower risk than them; some of those respects often mentioned include our powerful technology (i.e., its beneficial effects), globalization, modern medicine, and greater knowledge of past societies and of distant modern societies. We also differ from past societies in some respects that put us at greater risk than them: mentioned in that connection are, again, our potent technology (i.e., its unintended destructive effects), globalization (such that now a collapse even in remote Somalia affects the U.S. and Europe), the dependence of millions (and, soon, billions) of us on modern medicine for our survival, and our much larger human population. Perhaps we can still learn from the past, but only if we think carefully about its lessons.

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**Dr. Jared Diamond** was born in New York, received his doctorate from Oxford, and is Professor of Geography at the University of California, Los Angeles. His book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, received the Pulitzer prize.

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**About the editor:** Lindsey Grant is a writer and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Population and Environment.

**Negative Population Growth, Inc.**  
 2861 Duke Street  
 Suite 36  
 Alexandria, VA 22314  
 voice: 703-370-9510  
 fax: 703-370-9514  
 internet: [www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org)  
 e-mail: [npg@npg.org](mailto:npg@npg.org)

