

Building Society Up and Tearing it Down: Paired Reviews of Jared Diamond’s “Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies” and “Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed”

Kristin P. Jenkins

Published online: 8 February 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2008

There is a growing interest in the scientific community in cross-disciplinary research to address the complex world in which we live. Cross-disciplinary research generates novel insights by bringing together information and analytical approaches from different fields, enriching our understanding of the interactions and factors involved in events. Jared Diamond’s career demonstrates the value of a cross-disciplinary approach. Diamond earned his Ph.D. in physiology, but his research interests have taken him into the fields of evolution and geography. He is currently a professor of geography at the University of California, Los Angeles. Not only has he mastered various fields himself, he is also able to distill and communicate cross-disciplinary information to nonexperts. His most recent and potentially most important contributions to the popular scientific literature are the books “*Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*,” which explores the development and distribution of civilization, and “*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*,” which addresses the dynamics of maintaining a society over the long term.

Collapse

One can hardly avoid the dire media messages about the consequences of climate change and pollution, the threat of terrorism, and growing economic woes. Is the downfall of Western society imminent? How would we know and what could we do to prevent it? In “*Collapse*,” Jared Diamond

brings together historical and modern examples of societies that have succeeded or failed—some to the point of extinction. Diamond sets forth five criteria that he believes are key factors in determining how societies will fare in the long run. They are: environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, friendly trade partners, and last and arguably most critical, the society’s response to problems. For each society, the reader is guided through the information necessary to understand how some or all of these factors impacted the society. The examples range from ancient to recent events, and isolated island communities to continental empires. While environmental issues play a pivotal role in societal downfall, Diamond makes it clear that societies have a choice in how they respond to their environmental challenges.

The reader is guided through careful analyses of collapsed societies that demystify events that have been traditionally shrouded in enigma and romance, such as Easter Island—an island populated by giant stone statues. Readers are introduced to the current state of the island, the geography, climate, and history of the island gathered from Europeans, and the inhabitants of Easter Island, what foods were originally available, the societal structure, and the role of the stone statues in the society. All this information is then tied together in the tale of environmental change in the form of deforestation and the societal consequences. The reader is given an overall picture of what happened to this society, albeit with gaps that scientists are still investigating.

Frankly, it’s a depressing story, as are the other examples of failed societies. What makes them so depressing is the clear parallels between them and our own societies, be they local, continental, or global. It is clear that many of the same mistakes have been made repeatedly with the same disastrous results, and it is easy to see how these mistakes

K. P. Jenkins (✉)
National Evolutionary Synthesis Center,
Durham, NC, USA
e-mail: kjenkins@nescent.org

occur—the problems develop slowly or out of sight, and previously successful approaches are inadequate to address new problems. One might be tempted to sink into despair and embrace the doom of “environmental determinism,” except for Diamond’s repeated insistence and evidence of the critical aspect of how societies respond to these problems.

Diamond presents a number of examples of societies that have succeeded because they were able to recognize and respond appropriately to their situations. These societies were able to identify issues, foresee consequences, and change their values and behaviors to avoid disaster. None of these steps are simple or easy, and they are not always conducted in a way our society would approve—Diamond provides examples of dictators who, in forcing societies to behave in the way the dictator preferred, have deliberately or inadvertently developed environmentally sustainable situations that have proven beneficial to society in the long term. One of the values of this book lies in introducing the complex interplay of factors in long-term success. Different readers will come away with different ideas about how to maintain successful societies, but all readers will come away with a heightened awareness of the complexity of sustaining a society.

“*Collapse*” covers such a broad range of topics that it would be appropriate reading in a number of classes including biology, sociology, politics, economics, and archaeology. It should be noted that while Diamond’s writing is very accessible, the book is dense and is not a

“quick read.” Information is clearly presented and explained, and the reader is guided through the analyses. However, Diamond presents massive quantities of information in each chapter including historical and current societal background, as well as geographic, biological, and archaeological data, so that slow and careful reading is required.

Ironically, one downfall of writing about broad, complex topics is the necessity for simplification, and this is one of the criticisms of “*Collapse*.” A classic example of this kind of oversimplification is the question Diamond asks about deforestation of Easter Island, “What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last palm tree say while he was doing it?” (Subsequent studies have suggested that the deforestation was caused by a combination of factors including logging but also rats, introduced as stowaways with the human colonizers, which ate the palm nuts—and Dr. Diamond wrote a perspective for the article in *Science*.) I suspect that simplifications of this sort are designed to provoke self-analysis and discussion. However, this very detailed oversimplification might be used as a gateway for further studies by students into a particular society or an analysis of how one of Diamond’s proposed five key factors is playing out in their own society. The book includes a “Further Reading” section of extensive references by topic, which students could use for this purpose. To supplement the books, a lecture by Dr. Diamond on “*Collapse*” is available online from University of California Television at <http://www.uctv.tv/search-details.asp?showID=9390>, and a PBS series was developed for “*Guns, Germs, and Steel*.”