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## Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed by Jared Diamond (New York: Penguin Group, 2005)

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## **Book Reviews**

### **Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed by Jared Diamond (York: the Penguin Group, 2005. 575 pp. \$18 00)**

#### **A review by Kathleen Florita**

In Collapse, Jared Diamond, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Guns, Germs and Steel, explains why some societies fail and why others succeed by identifying five factors contributing to societal collapse: environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, friendly trade and society's response to its environmental problems. The first four factors do not always prove to be detrimental, but the fifth factor seems to determine the course of the society. The response to environmental problems lies completely within the control of a society, which is not necessarily true of the first four factors. It is here that his subtitle comes into play: a society can choose to fail. The idea of choice, therefore, is the real point of this book. Fate is not pre-determined, and societies are not destined to fail, but at the same time, they have to choose to succeed.

Diamond is a remarkable writer with the ability to combine a detailed history of the world with scientific concepts that can be easily understood by the general reader. His exploration of the demise of various civilizations offers in-depth analysis of current environmental problems. His studies of the environment's relationship to past failed societies subtly remind the reader of the possibility that it could also affect the United States. It has already happened in Rwanda; Australia suffers from various environmental problems; China presents a very interesting and complex case; and the United States is heading towards a crossroads.

Diamond's first case study is Montana, which he shows as a microcosm of the United States and as a society at a pivotal crossroads. Montana is known not only for its majestic natural beauty and its high quality of ranch and farm life, but also for its dependence on mining, logging and other heavy industries that has left the landscape unrecognizable. The mining companies refuse to clean up their mess unless forced to, but most Montanans do not support the government regulations due to a long-standing tradition of antigovernment attitude in state politics. Montana, as a society, has to make a choice: they can continue living the same way that they have for the past few decades, or they can change their values in order to respond to their environmental problems.

Montana is a relevant society with which to begin because it presents a central theme of Diamond's book: the notion that addressing environmental problems necessitates redefining or reexamining a society's core values, and then choosing which values to keep and which to discard. Societies that refuse to make that choice inevitably fail; they, in fact, commit suicide. Although Diamond offers many examples, including the inhabitants of Easter Island, the Anasazi of the U.S. Southwest, and the advanced Mayans in South America, the best example is that of the Norse society of Greenland, who shared the land with this Inuit. The interesting question is why the Norse failed and the Inuit survived. The Greenland Norse damaged their environment in at least three different ways: by destroying the natural vegetation, by causing soil erosion, and by cutting turf. Furthermore, they held onto their strong traditions and values of being European Christians, who scorned the non-European pagans, the Inuit. Had the Norse given up some of their value systems and adopted the ways of the Inuit, or at least attempted to

have peaceful relations with them, they might have survived in the harsh Greenland conditions.

In the second part of the book, Diamond begins to present modern societies: Rwanda, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), China and Australia. These case studies only reaffirm Diamond's proposed five factors of why some societies choose to fail or succeed.

Rwanda's failure as a modern state is typically attributed to the genocide resulting from ethnic tensions, but, what Diamond offers is a look into the pre-genocide events: severe problems of overpopulation, environmental impact and climate change. Moreover, it is difficult to claim that ethnic cleansing was the sole root of the Rwanda's collapse, when the fact remains that Hutu were killing other Hutu. The case of Rwanda shows that modern day societies fail, too, and with the same factors as past societies.

China also presents a very remarkable and complex case study. With the largest population and the fastest growing economy in the world, and with China seeking to live the life of a First World nation, there are devastating environmental and economic impacts. China's problems automatically become the world's problems. Diamond acknowledges that if China does, in fact, achieve First World standards, it will double the world's human resource use and environmental impact. However, Diamond notes that there have been efforts to protect the environment. China, therefore, is caught between an alarmingly high speed of environmental damage and environmental protection, but there is hope that the Chinese government will realize that environmental problems pose a greater threat than the population difficulties. Diamond says that China will have to adopt

environmental initiatives just as bold as its One-Child policy. China needs to reconsider its values in order to succeed; its fate is something we shall see in our lifetime.

Lastly, Diamond explains how societies make such self-destructive decisions by offering a road map of four factors that lead to group decision making failures: firstly, a group may fail to anticipate a problem before the problem actually arrives; secondly, when a problem does arrive, the group may fail to perceive it; thirdly, after they perceive the problem, they may not try to solve it; and fourthly, they may try to solve the problem, but not succeed (421). Of the factors, the most frequent and surprising is the third, which brings Diamond's discussion of values back into focus. The difficulty of changing or discarding core values—even when they result in harmful outcomes on both individuals and societies—poses a pointed question: at what point do we, as individuals, prefer to die than to compromise and live? (433). Perhaps knowing which core values to keep and which to leave is the key to a successful society.

Diamond offers a realistic picture of our world society in motion on a non-sustainable course, and one way or another, it will be solved. Although it seems as if there was no hope left for the modern world, and that modern society will inevitably face the same fate the ancient civilizations, Diamond reminds the audience that there is a choice of ways to solve the present problems. Modern societies, in particular the United States, should learn to live within their means, and furthermore, since we cause our environmental problems, we control them; therefore, we can choose to stop causing them and start solving them. There is a need for long-term planning and for a redefinition of our core values, which must be done in collaboration of governments and their citizens.

Ancient societies failed to address their environmental problems, and in such, failed as societies. Do modern societies face the same risk?? The parallels Diamond draws are uncanny, and yet at the same time, are questionable. Clearly, there are lessons to be learned from past failed societies, but, as oppositionists have pointed out, past societies had neither the population nor the technology of our modern ones. However, Diamond quickly points out that these differences, in fact, greatly increase the risk of collapse. History repeats itself, and it seems like the safe bet is to be safe rather than sorry.

The question that remains is whether Diamond succeeded in convincing the reader—or more particularly the American public—that something has to be done to make sure the United States is on the path of a successful society. As the environmentalism campaign gains momentum, one can only hope that Diamond's words of wisdom will transform at least some of the world's citizens. If nothing else, readers will at least understand what the person who cut down the last tree on Easter Island was thinking when he did it.

Diamond has written a fascinating explanation of the collapse of various failed world civilizations. This thought-provoking and eloquently written book is a great resource of reasons why some societies fail and why others succeed, but it is more importantly an intensive guide detailing how to prevent societal failure and how to establish a successful one.