

## Book Review

**Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed by Jared Diamond, New York:**

**Viking, 2004, 526 pages**

Jared Diamond is a renowned geographer and biologist who has published many books and journal articles. One of his books titled, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* is an informative read for those interested in the formation and evolution of human societies and civilizations. The archaeological sources, which the author used to substantiate his explanations and arguments on how ancient civilizations flourished and declined, are intriguing. The author examines cases from each continent of the world, to show how ancient and modern civilizations succeed and fail in Africa, Europe, Australia, Asia and America. Structuring the content as a series of question and answer, the author impressively brings together complexity and clarity and makes the entire experience a joy to the reader. He begins his writing by raising a grand question, *How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, and continues another question: why do some societies make a disastrous decision? The book has four parts, divided into sixteen chapters which are coherently organized.

The first two parts of the book mainly deal with cases in ancient societies, their success and failure in their civilization. The author identifies factors, which determine the success and failure of the societies in their civilization. These are, among other things, environmental degradation, climate change, population growth, bad tradition (culture), hostile neighbors, and unfriendly trade partners.

As exemplars of failed civilizations, the author examines the cases of Montana, Easter Islands, Henderson Island and Pitcairn Island, Anasazi, Maya, Viking and Norse Greenland (p. 25-276). According to the author, ancient peoples in these regions founded well-organized civilizations. However, these civilizations collapsed because of the aforementioned factors. For instance, in Ester Islands different peoples were competing to build monuments, palaces and houses for residence or prestige. From the year 1400 to 1600 AD, forests in the Island were nearly cleared. This led to the collapse of Easter Islands (p. 107).

In line with failure stories, the author argues that the collapse of one society's civilization may a cause for the collapse of another society's civilization. He presents the cases of Mangareva, Pitcairn and Henderson islanders. These islanders had reciprocal relations for many years. They exchanged their products through trade and marriage gifts. However,

because of massive deforestation and soil erosion Mangareva was unable to feed its large population. This brought internal and regional chaos. The collapse of Mangareva brought the decline of Pitcairn and Henderson.

Interestingly, Jared also shows that collapse can also occur in the most developed societies. The Anasazi and Maya are good examples. The Anasazi, though they had no writing system had achieved astonishing civilization which flourished about 600 AD in southwest America (p.143). They erected large stone buildings without the influence of neighboring civilizations, but they were dependent on imported food from Mexico. Thus, lack of imported goods, deforestation, lack of rainfall and fighting with each other were some of the factors for the disappearance of the Anasazi civilization.

The Maya had their own writing system and were known for their pottery, basket making and building civilization. They mainly grew corn and beans for food. They used different mechanisms to conserve the ecology including tunneled depression construction to collect rainwater. The Maya civilization collapsed because of recurring occurrence of drought, bad neighbors, and dysfunctional government. Another important point that the author highlights is the significance of food security for military strength and the survival of a society. The Maya and Aztecs corn agriculture were not sufficient to support its people and soldiers. On the other hand, the Maori, the earliest settler in New Zealand, transformed their economy when the Europeans introduced potato in 1815. They began to produce huge amount of potato, which enabled them to feed many soldiers. As a result, they successfully occupied many territories (p. 165). Similarly, the Inut and the Norse people shared the Greenland Island for living. However, the traditional norms of the Norse, for instance, a taboo that is against eating fish, contributed to their collapse whereas that of the Inut which promoted the preservation of the environment contributed for the survival of their civilization (p. 230).

There were also societies who were able to successfully adjust or adapt to their civilization. Some of these were found in New Guinea, Japan, Tikopia, and Tokugawa (p. 277-308). People in these regions have faced a high rate of population growth and scarcity of resources such as land and wood. This brought deforestation and soil erosion (p. 429). The people devised bottom-up and top-down approach to preserve the ecology. For instance, Tikopia islanders eliminated pigs, even though they were the sole large domestic animals and a symbol of social status (p. 522-524). The New Guinea Highland adopted crop rotation

strategies to keep the fertility of the soil. Other methods used to check population growth included contraception, infanticide, abortion, suicide and starvation (p. 285-300).

In the third part of the book, Diamond analyses modern societies, the cases of Rwanda, Dominican Republic and Haiti, Lurching Giant in China, and Australia. He explains that these modern societies are also failing as well. The Rwanda case was one of the most shocking happenings of recent times. Colonialism, high population growth, extreme deforestation, scarce resources and dysfunctional government led to genocide (p. 311).

On the other hand, Haitian and Dominican people live on the same island, Hispaniola but have different stories. The Haitian has received less amount of rainfall because of the barrier of high mountains blocking rains from the east than the Dominican. In Haiti the topography and the soil is not conducive to agriculture. However, Haiti developed a rich agricultural economy ahead of the Dominican Republic. The paradox is that Haiti's burst of agricultural wealth came at the expense of its environmental capital of forest and soil. Gradually, however, Haiti became one of the poorest countries in the world. The reason for this, according to the author, was not only the environment degradation but their histories, attitudes, self-defined identity, institutions and difference in leadership (p.329). Another case the author raises is the environmental problems in China. Air pollution, overgrazing and cropland loss are some of the acute problems in China. The author also discusses the situation in Australia. He mentions Australia has faced several problems, including scarcity of water, land degradation and remoteness (p. 378).

The fourth part of the book deals with the practical lesson to be drawn from these stories and where we might look for solutions for the problem. He grapples with the question of why do some societies make a disastrous decision and offers four possible explanations. First, a society may fail to anticipate a problem before it happens. Second, a society may fail to anticipate when the problem happens. Third, a society may fail to recognize the problem after it is perceived. Fourth a society may fail when attempting to solve it.

In general, the book provides empirical examples and historical lessons that can help us to recognize the grave danger our world faces at present but also how to care for the environment. From the collapse of Montanans to modern day Australia and China, and to events as recent as in Syria and Iraq, Diamond in this book not only reminds us to acknowledge the ever-present danger of collapse but also challenges us to remain vigilant.

*Ayele Tariku, Bahir Dar University*