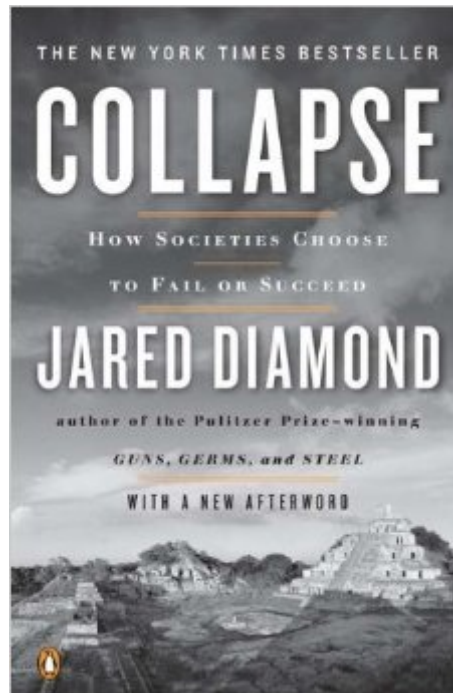


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Collapse: How Societies Choose To Fail Or Succeed: Revised Edition



Synopsis

In Jared Diamond's follow-up to the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Guns, Germs and Steel*, the author explores how climate change, the population explosion and political discord create the conditions for the collapse of civilization. Environmental damage, climate change, globalization, rapid population growth, and unwise political choices were all factors in the demise of societies around the world, but some found solutions and persisted. As in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond traces the fundamental pattern of catastrophe, and weaves an all-encompassing global thesis through a series of fascinating historical-cultural narratives. *Collapse* moves from the Polynesian cultures on Easter Island to the flourishing American civilizations of the Anasazi and the Maya and finally to the doomed Viking colony on Greenland. Similar problems face us today and have already brought disaster to Rwanda and Haiti, even as China and Australia are trying to cope in innovative ways. Despite our own society's apparently inexhaustible wealth and unrivaled political power, ominous warning signs have begun to emerge even in ecologically robust areas like Montana. Brilliant, illuminating, and immensely absorbing, *Collapse* is destined to take its place as one of the essential books of our time, raising the urgent question: How can our world best avoid committing ecological suicide?

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Collapse" is a wonderful book! Prof. Diamond combines hard science, rigorous historical research, and his own personal knowledge of people from the Bitterroot Valley of Montana to the west coast

of Greenland to Rwanda to the highlands of New Guinea. He pulls together clear and compelling explanations of how events unfolded (and are still unfolding) in various parts of the world. His accounts of various human communities draw on real data from a wide variety of academic fields, including isotope analysis, pollen analysis, tree-ring analysis, seismology, agronomy, archaeology, sociology, and even the history of religion. His explanations of each of these disciplines are lucid without oversimplification. But, the strength of the book comes from the way he combines results from all these fields to create straightforward narratives of what might have happened as various communities rose and fell. If I were a high school "social studies" teacher I would be talking to my principal today, saying "I want to put together an honors-level geography course and I want to use this as the textbook." I do have one criticism. The subject matter of the book is tremendously consequential to people alive today, and hopefully "policy wonks" in governments will study the book and take it seriously. But, the title is a bit inflammatory. What's more, Prof. Diamond makes sure to explain the significance for the United States of his accounts of the demise of various ancient communities. Some of these explanations extrapolate from ancient situations to modern in a way that isn't quite as solid as the rest of the book. Diamond's extrapolations are very clearly marked as such. However, I am still afraid that they, combined with the title, will provide an excuse for people to dismiss the book as a "pro-environment anti-business" ideological polemic. That would be unfortunate, because it is actually balanced and nuanced in its explanation of the human condition.

About 15 years ago, I was shocked to read the results of an American aerial survey of roads in remote areas of the country, which concluded that there is (in 1990) no place in the continental United States that is more than about 20 miles, as the crow flies, from the nearest road. At Philmont Scout Ranch in the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rockies in NE New Mexico, to which many hundreds of Scouts travel each summer for an extended "wilderness" hike, the paths, directions and speeds of each of the flood of hiking parties is managed on a wall-size map in their war room, much like a flight control room of a modern airport. The conscious purpose of the war room is to present "the illusion of wilderness" to the hikers, by preventing them from seeing that there are crowds of other hikers nearby in every direction, only hidden by a bend, a ridge, a ravine. In one of Jared Diamond's earlier books, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, he explored the role of man's natural environment in shaping the unique nature of the human societies that emerged in different regions of the world. It was backed by a prodigious body of research spanning anthropology, physiology, botany, archeology, animal behavior and climatology, to name only a few fields. Although his conclusions were satisfying and plausible, the subjects were too remote in time to garner more than a smile and

a nod of the head. The paucity of detailed evidence regarding the biologic emergence of man, and man's development of agriculture, animal domestication and civilization, dooms Dr. Diamond's conclusions on those subjects to the realm of conjecture. Now we are presented with the other side of the equation: the role of man's behavior in shaping the environments in which he lives. While Professor Diamond seems to go to great lengths to present us with a glimmer of optimism in the face of a substantial body of contrary information, the thrust of this new volume is that today, anybody's environmental problem is everybody's problem. His discussions of past failed (and successful) societies serve as a sequence of progressively more complex environmental scenarios highlighting the choices—both intentional and unintentional—that determined the ultimate outcome. One wonders how intelligent people in those societies that ultimately failed seemed to have made decisions that, at least in retrospect, were patently damaging to their future survival. Diamond offers numerous examples of contemporary environmental challenges for which perfectly rational individuals and governments have made, and continue to make, decisions that are damaging to their future survival. Over thirty years ago, JW Forrester, then at MIT, developed a computer simulation called World II, which modeled scores of human and environmental factors, in order to see what future the model would predict for the world. In brief, the simulation demonstrated catastrophic population collapse between 2040 and 2060, regardless of how the values of variables and their interactions were adjusted. The only stable simulations required that the world population be set to below its current (1970) value. Well, we can set aside their conclusions as peculiar to their particular set of assumptions, but in Jared Diamond's current book, he concludes that each of the individual, massive environmental issues covered in his various examples will reach catastrophic crisis by about 2050, if they are not addressed promptly and in a dramatic way. I find the correlation sobering. From the standpoint purely of readable history, *Collapse* offers more credible conclusions about the decline of the societies it surveys than does the massive 12 volumes of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. Toynbee leaned heavily on Hegelian dialectic, Diamond on compelling archeological studies and on the physical sciences. Though a professor of geography, Diamond's formal training was in biology and physiology. Add to that his lifelong studies in ornithology, which have contributed to his wide-ranging travels in third world countries, and it should come as no surprise that the science presented here stands up fairly well to close scrutiny. This is a book that will certainly appeal to historians, environmentalists and folks who want to know what the tree-hugging fuss is all about. For those who might be disinclined toward environmentalist assertions, this book can serve as a framework for the serious concerns that must be addressed in some fashion.

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