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Jared Diamond. Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed. New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 2005.

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Diamond's 2005 book has been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, and *The London Review of Books*, as well as in many academic publications. Most of the reviews have been favorable, though, some have questioned, the book's organization into two seemingly disparate parts. The first part of the text concentrates primarily on the collapse of societies on relatively isolated islands, such as Easter Island, Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, and the country of Greenland and secondarily on the collapse of the ancient societies of the Anasazi and the Maya. Diamond contrasts these societal failures with the successes of island societies in New Guinea, Tikopia, and Tokugawa Japan. The second part of the book concentrates on the demise of societies in Rwanda, Hispaniola, China, and Australia.

The primary problem most critics cite with respect to Diamond's *Collapse* is the unclear connection between the first and second parts of the text. Some reviewers more pointedly question the relevance of the first part of the book altogether. For instance, Gregg Easterbrook, in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* section published on January 30, 2005, pointed out, "Most people do not live on islands, yet „Collapse“ tries to generalize from environmental failures on isolated islands to environmental threats to society as a whole." Likewise, Michiko Kakutani wrote in *The New York Times Books of the Times* section on January 11, 2005, "Diamond's selection of failed civilizations from the past seems arbitrary in the extreme: Why Easter Island and not ancient Rome? Why the Anasazi of the American Southwest and not the Minoans of ancient Crete?" I submit that the collapse of Rome and the Minoans is not so easily traced to deforestation, which, in Diamond's view, is the major cause of the collapse of the several societies he does investigate.

Beyond these critiques of the organization or relevance of the societies analyzed in *Collapse*, however, lies a more fundamental problem with the credibility and accuracy of the analyses Diamond provides. Diamond is certainly a major figure in scholarly circles. He has a Ph.D. in physiology and membrane biophysics from the University of Cambridge and is currently Professor of Geography and Physiology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is well known for his ornithological work in New Guinea and also for his work in environmental history. He speaks several languages and has written popular science books in a number of different fields, including human evolution and human sexuality. He is probably most widely known for his 1999 *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which sought to give an ecological explanation of why Europe dominated the world in recent history. Particularly problematic, then, is the questionable nature of *Collapse's* success stories. Diamond does not sufficiently clarify: Were these societies ecologically successful? Were they evolutionarily successful? At what social cost was success achieved? Nor does Diamond clarify how long a society needs to survive to be successful or at what degree of consistency. Certainly Japan of today, as well as Tikopia and New Guinea, are not the same societies that Diamond describes as successes. Furthermore, the 260 or so years of "success" in Tokugawa, Japan were based on an inflexible class hierarchy, including the brutality that comes with military rule. Peasant protests were harshly suppressed, widespread infanticide was used to control population growth, and eventually the ruling class became overrun by corruption and incompetence (see, e.g., Andrew Gordon's 2003 *A Modern History of Japan*). But Tokugawa, Japan, especially in the later period, did a good job of managing its forests (pp. 299-306).

Nowhere is the weakness of Diamond's analyses more evident than in his exploration of

the collapse of Haiti. In Chapter 11, Diamond writes about the island of Hispaniola, which is divided into two nations: Haiti on the west, occupying approximately one third of the island, and the Dominican Republic on the east, occupying the remainder of the island. Diamond presents the contrast between the two nations as a case study in “understanding the modern world’s problems” (p. 329). Unfortunately, his analysis of Haiti is superficial at best and misleading at worst, and his treatment of the Dominican Republic is unacceptably favorable. The chapter concentrates mostly on the Dominican Republic; Diamond writes about “my Dominican friends” (p. 352) and seems to empathize with Dominicans considerably more than with Haitians. (All the names mentioned in the acknowledgments for Chapter 11 are Dominican names (p. 527). Indeed, he apparently visited the Dominican Republic, but I found no indication that he was ever in Haiti).

Unacceptably, Diamond omits in his account of the “collapse” of Haiti any mention of the overbearing, exploitative, and misdirected role of the U.S. government (including to a lesser degree the Canadian and French governments), whose policies beginning in 1971 featured an economic program focused on private investments from U.S. companies with no custom taxes, a minimum wage kept very low, the suppression of labor unions, and the right of these U.S. companies to repatriate their profits. Add to this the enormous influx of unregulated NGOs, Protestant missionaries, and other misguided do-gooders, and there is certainly a recipe for collapse, but a collapse due to outside impinging forces, not to choices made by Haitians. This omission was not lost on Timothy T. Schwartz, who argues in chapter Seven of his 2008 *Travesty in Haiti* that the U.S.A. destroyed the economy of Haiti. Schwartz boldly states, “The U.S. government working through USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and the planners at the World’s Major international lending institutions--the World Bank, The Inter American Development Bank (IDB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), all U.S. and secondarily E.U. controlled--were led by USAID in adopting policies that, with perhaps the best of intentions, would destroy the Haitian economy of small farmers” (2008:108). These policy makers explicitly stated that moving farmers off the land would create a labor force for the U.S. offshore industries in Haiti, reduce soil erosion, and provide a market for U.S. government-subsidized agricultural products Diamond fails to mention any word of this. Nor does he mention that “Until the 1980s Haiti was almost entirely self-sufficient in rice consumption, something made possible, in part, by protecting Haitian farmers from the heavily subsidized rice produced in the U.S. and Europe” (2008:109) or that during the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. rice--subsidized at a rate that varied from 35% to 100%--flooded into the country” (Schwartz 2008:109), sabotaging the indigenous rice industry.

Perhaps the most inexcusable of Diamond’s omissions with respect to his analysis of the demise of Haiti is the absence of any word in Diamond’s book of the U.S.-imposed pig eradication campaign that lasted from 1982 to 1984, ostensibly done under the questionable belief that swine fever would spread to the U.S. pig population. (For details see Chapter Five in my 1992 *Haiti’s Bad Press*.) The loss of these pigs was the final straw that destroyed the Haitian peasant economy. Nevertheless, Diamond writes, “The contrast between Haiti and the Dominican Republic . . . provide[s] the clearest illustrations that a society’s fate lies in its own hands and depends substantially on its own choices” (p. 341), when in fact, the contrast more accurately serves to provide a clear illustration of the impact of globalization. (Indeed, it should have immediately been socioeconomically jarring to Diamond that one of the poorest nations in the world is located only one and a half hours by jet or about 710 miles from one of the richest nations in the world). As Diamond himself suggests, “A major difference [between environmental dangers today and those faced by past societies] has to do with globalization” (p.

23). In truth, as is argued by Schwartz due to increases in globalization the U.S. has been able to politically and economically dominate Haiti and deleteriously impact Haiti.

His incomplete portrayal of Haiti's "collapse" can be attributed to a shortcoming of Diamond's: an underdeveloped understanding of globalization. Despite his passing acknowledgment of the importance of globalization, Diamond does not write much about globalization nor does he seem to have a grasp of the processes of globalization. His most extended discussion of globalization only speaks to the "bad things transported from the First World to developing countries" (p. 517), concentrating on "garbage transport" (p. 517) and "poisonous chemicals" (p. 518), as well as the Third World sending "us [sic] their own bad things . . . like AIDS, SARS, cholera, and West Nile fever" (p. 518). A reading in the literature of world-systems theory and dependency theory would go far to raise the level of sophistication in Diamond's discussion of globalization and to correct his superficial understanding of the relationships between the First and Third Worlds.

Diamond's 1987 article about the invention of agriculture, "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race" has been influential, and his ecological explanations in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* made a valuable contribution in countering a racist perspective on human history and development. But *Collapse* is, frankly, a considerable disappointment. Stripped of its rhetoric, the general thrust of what Diamond writes in *Collapse* is almost comically correct. Yes, people can ruin their environments. Yes, this is going on now. Yes, we have been doing this forever. Anthropologist Marvin Harris, another major figure in scholarly circles, famously posited ecological explanations for various pivotal episodes in human history that are strikingly similar to Diamond's, though Diamond never cites him. In fact, in the 1860s in his four-volume *Die Anthropologie der Naturvölker* Theodor Waitz, the famous German anthropologist, reached the same conclusions as Diamond and Harris, but Diamond has never cited Waitz.

Diamond labels himself "a cautious optimist" (p. 521), and buried at the very end of the book, beyond the "Further Readings" section and covering only five pages, are Diamond's ideas about how individuals can provide solutions to environmental problems (pp. 556-560). In democracies, he says, people should find out the politicians' positions on environmental issues and vote for ecological progressives (though politicians may overstate their commitment to environmental issues to gain votes). Consumers should refuse to buy products that have harmed the environment in their processing, (though this would, I am sure, leave us with very little to buy, as most manufacturers have yet to implement sufficiently green measures). Religious people can build support within their organizations, and homeowners can improve their own environments. Everyone can donate to an environmental movement, (though Diamond tells us that "one of the three largest and best-funded environmental organizations" [p. 559] in the world has the minuscule budget of only US\$100 million).

In short, the academic world should, indeed, produce people who can write for the general public about the big picture, and academicians do, indeed, have to be careful not to become carping specialists. But certainly the public and the scholars also deserve careful more scholarship and well-formed arguments than Diamond provides in his *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*.

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