

Crying ‘Wolf’

Tales of Hard Times to Come

BOOK REVIEW BY MICHAEL W. MASTERS

*This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*
—T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”

When the Club of Rome issued its foreboding 1972 report, *The Limits of Growth*—predicting worldwide depletion of oil, minerals and other vital resources—the warning struck many as a case of crying “wolf” when there was none.

In a time of plenty, who believed hard times were ahead? Although the onset of shortages was said to be 30 years away, inevitably the

long-term nature of the message got scraped off in the retelling. When the world did not collapse in the next three months—about the attention span of the average consumer or politician—the report was soon forgotten by many. As recently as 1980, economist Julian Simon could famously—and successfully—bet biologist Paul Ehrlich that the price of five chosen metals would be less in 1990 when adjusted for inflation, reflecting an increased supply, not a shortage.

But, that was then and this is now. Three and a half decades after *Limits* the importance of sustainability is growing in the public consciousness. Those who believe the future of our children and grandchildren depends on action should take heart; problems such as Peak Oil, foretold by the Club of

Rome, are becoming too obvious to ignore. Among the latest to cry “wolf”—and very compellingly so—is Jared Diamond, Pulitzer prize-winning author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*. His most recent opus, *Collapse, How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, takes a wide-ranging look at resource exhaustion, environment fragility, population growth, consumption, pollution, and other factors that determine the future of nations and peoples.

The book attempts to pinpoint attributes that foster enduring societies and to identify factors that push them toward catastrophic failure, even disappearance. His findings reflect extensive research and rigorous methodology. They carry considerable weight, and we ignore them at our peril.

A History of Tragedies

Diamond explores five factors that contribute to societal collapse: environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, friendly trade partners and, perhaps most critical of all, societies’ responses to problems. Environmental damage can occur in many ways: “deforestation and habitat destruction, soil problems (erosion, salinization, and soil fertility losses), water management problems, overhunting, overfishing, effects of introduced species on native species, human population growth, and increased per-capita impact of people.” *Collapse* examines many societies around the world—past and present, large and small—in light of these factors, including many that have (so far) dealt successfully with their problems and many more that have not. At the end of *Collapse*, Diamond examines trends and prospects in light of increased globalization, a

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed

by Jared Diamond

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factor that renders unlikely any solution attempted in isolation.

The bottom line message? We must incorporate concern for our environment and its finite resources into our core values and we must base our plans for the future on those values.

Initially, Diamond examines several historical examples of societal collapse. Case studies include Easter Island, Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, the Anasazi Indians of the American Southwest, the Mayans of Mexico, and the Norse colony of Greenland. Suffice it to say that deforestation and/or soil damage played a pivotal role in the collapse of each. In some cases, notably the Polynesian islands and Anasazi Indians, the end was brutal: escalating internecine warfare over control of dwindling resources ending in cannibalism among the last remnants. The result was dissolution or extinction of entire populations.

In Greenland, environmental damage was central but other factors came into play—e.g. the inability of Norse Greenlanders to establish peaceful relations with native Inuit Indians. Distance also played a role, increasing the difficulty of trade and cultural interchange with the colony's Scandinavian homeland. The Greenland story contrasts with that of Iceland, a colony founded by culturally identical people. Iceland has endured for hundreds of years despite early ecological reverses through the determined efforts of its inhabitants to minimize environmental damage. In dealing with their fragile environment Icelanders were forced to exercise decision-making that is “flexible and sensitive” but “also conservative”—perhaps a lesson for us.

Success Stories

Collapse also examines societies that have proven to be sustainable over many centuries. Besides Iceland, examples include the Polynesian islands of Tikopia and Tonga, settled 3,000 years ago, and highland New Guinea. Perhaps most

relevant to our world is Japan. The Japanese, a highly intelligent and industrious—and ethnically homogeneous—people, showed remarkable prescience in recognizing the adverse impact of deforestation. By 1600 A.D., they were on the verge of wiping out their forests. Faced with shortages, Japanese shoguns imposed strict limits on timber harvests. As a consequence, Japan

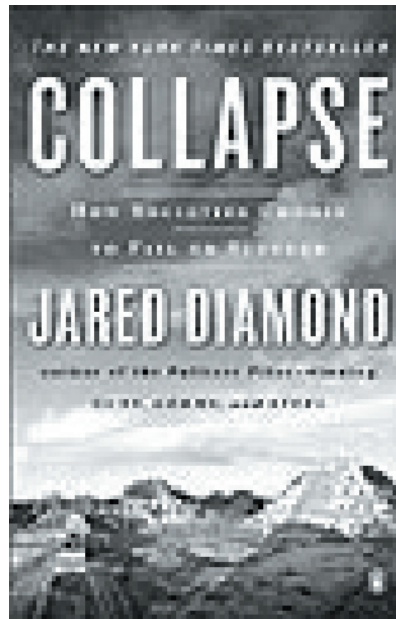
reduced consumption to an extent that it has maintained sustainable forests ever since. (Japan has lately increased wood use but without impact on its own forests. As one of the world's largest importers of timber it now is a major player driving Third World deforestation. Similarly, Japan is one of the worst exploiters of ocean fisheries, and it poses a threat to the world's whales.)

On a smaller scale, highland New Guineans evolved a lifestyle that has proved stable for centuries. The New Guinea story interests because its inhabitants lack the high degree of intelligence of

the Japanese; they have never evolved beyond a quasi-Stone Age existence. Diamond attributes their success to a mysterious and unique blend of folk wisdom, but one may also surmise that such primitive people hardly place the same demands on an environment as a more advanced people. The politically correct Diamond ignores this possibility. Indeed, his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs and Steel* constituted a slick rhetorical effort to “prove” that success results solely from environmental accidents, (e.g. climate, geography, even germs) rather than from the fact that different peoples vary in their innate abilities. That all peoples are equal in ability is a central tenet of cultural Marxism—despite the fact that this has been repeatedly disproved by a century of intelligence testing.

Today's Problems

Modern societies discussed include Rwanda, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, China, and Australia. Both China and Australia face severe problems, Australia because of its climate and



fragile environment and China due to its enormous population, now near 1.3 billion. As with earlier examples, Australia has cut its forests, ruined much of its soil, and allowed itself to be overrun with non-native species. Despite its large land mass, Australia is sparsely settled at 20 million and is thus, one might suppose, unworthy of scrutiny. But, as a fully First World nation in attitudes and politics as well as in resource use Australia presents a preview of what the rest of the West may soon face.

“To those of us inclined to pessimism or even just to realistic sober thinking, all those facts give us reason to wonder whether Australians are doomed to a declining standard of living in a steadily deteriorating environment... the realistic prospects of [this]

first scenario, apply to the rest of the First World as well, with the sole difference that Australia could end up in the first scenario sooner.”

Not the least of Australia’s problems is its attitude toward immigration, particularly from Asia. The “White Australia” policy was abandoned in 1975, falling to the desire of business and political interests for growth and profit. “[M]any influential Australians, including the recent Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, the leaders of both major political parties, and the Australian Business Council, still argue that Australia should try to increase its population to 50 million people.” This attitude is little different from that which prevails in America and Europe: political parties, in the thrall of big business, promote limitless immigration—and consequences be damned. “In the long run it is doubtful that Australia can even support its present population: the best estimate of a population sustainable at the present standard of living is 8 million people, less than half the present population.”

China is, if anything, worse; its centralized political structure has created “messes on a scale scarcely possible for European and American leaders.” Because of its enormous population, its

determination to reach First World living standards, and its lack of environmental concern China impacts not only its own environment but also the rest of the world. China is “the world’s largest producer and consumer of gaseous ozone-depleting substances, such as chlorofluorocarbons. . .China also now contributes to the atmosphere 12 percent of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions that play a major role in global warming. . .China already leads the

world in production of sulfur oxides.” Carried by winds, China’s pollutant-laden dust, sand and soil spread across Korea, Japan, Pacific Islands, and on to the U.S.

China also harms other societies by exporting invasive species, each honed

to a sharp competitive edge in China’s immense interior. They include the chestnut blight, the misnamed “Dutch” elm disease and the Asian long-horned beetle. And there is more: China’s endlessly renewable export, the Chinese themselves. “Still another species of which China has an abundant population, which has large ecological and economic impacts, and which China is exporting in increasing numbers is *Homo sapiens*. For instance, China has now moved into third place as a source of legal immigration into Australia, and significant numbers of illegal as well as legal immigrants crossing the Pacific Ocean reach even the U.S.”

Nor is change certain. “[A]ll one can say for sure is that things will get worse before they get better, because of time lags and the momentum of damage already under way.” Not the least of the factors driving Chinese environmental ruin is the fact that China is rapidly becoming First World in terms of industrialization, consumption, and pollution even as it remains communist politically.

Globalization’s Dark Side

Globalization has inverted former House of Representatives Speaker Tip O’Neill’s political

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aphorism, “all politics is local.” Problems can affect entire continents and oceans, and solutions must be worldwide in scope. Diamond identifies twelve problems faced by today’s societies, all of which must be solved if modern civilization is to continue. They are:

- Deforestation, *the* or *a* cause of the collapse of all past failed societies.
- Depletion of the open ocean fisheries, a true “tragedy of the commons.”
- Loss of species worldwide, a process that is, tragically, accelerating.
- Loss of soils through erosion, depletion of nutrients and salinization.
- Depletion of fossil fuels, of which Peak Oil is a major looming instance.
- Depletion of fresh water aquifers—an emerging problem in the America West.
- The photosynthetic ceiling (a somewhat esoteric concept associated with the fact that only so much sunlight falls on arable land for use by plants).
- Toxic chemicals, the impact of which rival radioactive waste in many cases.
- Invasive species (and its corollary, Third World immigration).
- Polluting gases in the atmosphere, a factor driving global warming.
- Human population increase, the total of which has long since passed six billion.
- Human impact on the environment, an impact that will surely increase as the Third World strives for First World living standards, not only in their own lands but as immigrants in Western nations.

One cannot solve just some of these problems because they are interrelated. “[O]ne problem exacerbates another or makes its solution more difficult. For example, human population growth affects all eleven other problems: more people means more deforestation, more toxic chemicals, more demand for wild fish, etc.” Energy leads the list:

The energy problem is linked to other problems because use of fossil fuels for energy contributes heavily to greenhouse gases, the combating of soil fertility losses by using synthetic fertilizers requires

energy to make the fertilizers, fossil fuel scarcity increases our interest in nuclear energy which poses potentially the biggest ‘toxic’ problem of all in case of an accident, and fossil fuel scarcity also makes it more expensive to solve our freshwater problems by using energy to desalinize ocean water.

Collapse spends many pages analyzing why problems are not addressed despite the fact that, left unsolved, they have lethal consequences for societies that ignore them. The unfortunate truth is that many problems reveal their impact so imperceptibly that it is difficult to generate public support for fixes in the early stages, when remedial action would be less complex, disruptive, and costly. The old adage, ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,’ is difficult to apply when the public focus is short-term gain rather than long-term survival.

The Tragedy of the Commons

In a very real sense the world’s oceans, atmosphere and other resources are worldwide “commons” like those Garrett Hardin discussed in his 1968 essay, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Absent a high level of moral restraint, “immoral and short-sighted people will invariably act in ways that serve their own self-interest but that inflict great harm on many others.” Even the politically correct Diamond concedes that the requisite behavior is more likely in homogeneous societies: “. . . throughout human history, in all politically complex human societies in which people encounter other individuals with whom they have no ties of family or clan relationship, government regulation has arisen precisely because it was found to be necessary for the enforcement of moral principles.”

Diamond posits three approaches to solving this problem: top down imposition of environmental controls, privatization of resources, and recognition of a common interest. The first two solutions are fraught with peril. Top down control at a global level evokes fears of an all-powerful global government, a possibility that is anathema to many Americans—and for good reason. The Roman historian, Tacitus, called lust for power “the most flagrant of all passions.” Lord Acton wrote, “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Diamond sees the danger. “A further conflict arises. . . when the

interests of the decision-making elite in power clash with the interests of the rest of society. Especially if the elite can insulate themselves from the consequences of their actions, they are likely to do things that profit themselves regardless of whether those actions hurt everyone else.”

As to privatization on a global scale, large resource reserves surely require large private entities to manage them. Given the propensity of businesses to act out of greed rather than community interest this solution hardly seems workable. Immoral behavior provides immense benefit to the few engaged in it but spreads out the cost over the entire population. Each individual gains only a little from cessation of the exploitive behavior. As a result, far too many corporate moguls “advance their own interests through bonuses and high salaries, by making messes and leaving the burden to society.” This leaves only one alternative—and not the one, we suspect, the politically correct Diamond intended.

The remaining solution to the tragedy of the commons is for the consumers to recognize their common interests and to design, obey, and enforce prudent harvesting quotas themselves. This is likely to happen only if a whole series of conditions is met: *the consumers form a homogeneous group; they have learned to trust and communicate with each other; they expect to share a common future and to pass on the resources to their heirs; they are capable of and permitted to organize and police themselves; and the boundaries of the resource and its pool of consumers are well defined.* [emphasis added]

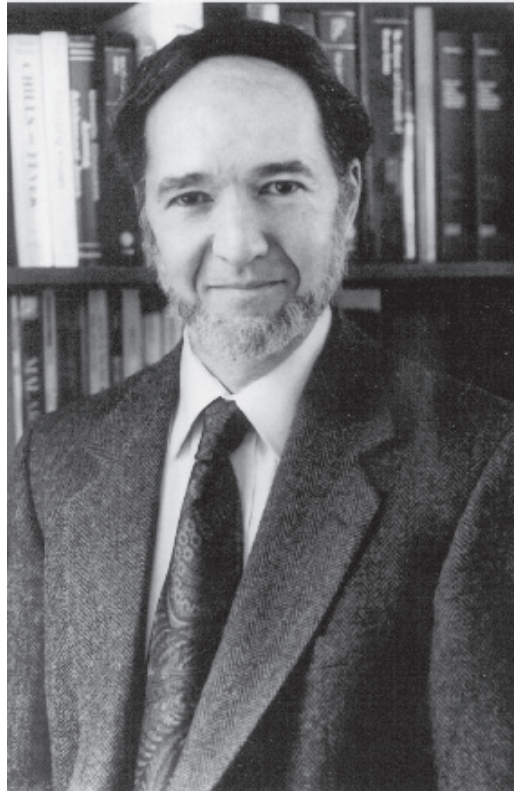
The Role of Core Values

Something must change. “Our world society is presently on a non-sustainable course, and any of our 12 problems of non-sustainability that we have just summarized would suffice to limit our lifestyle within the next several decades. They are like time bombs with fuses of less than 50 years.” He adds: “If we don’t make a determined effort to solve them, and if we don’t succeed at that effort, the world as a whole within the next few decades will face a declining standard of living, or perhaps something worse.” Perhaps the most chilling thought of all is how swift the end may come. “[M]aximum population, wealth, resource consumption, and waste production mean maximum environmental impact. . . .”

Given this, “a society’s steep decline may begin only a decade or two after the society reaches its peak numbers.”

Diamond believes that solution is difficult but not impossible. “One basis for hope is that, realistically, we are not beset by insoluble problems. While we do face big risks, the most serious ones are not ones beyond our control, like a possible collision with an asteroid of a size that hits Earth every hundred million years or so.” Two factors appear paramount: “long-term planning, and willingness to reexamine core values.” Regarding the former, “One of those choices has depended on the courage to practice long-term thinking and to make bold, courageous anticipatory decisions at a time when problems have become perceptible but before they have reached crisis proportions.” Politicians, take note.

Perhaps even more important is the role of core values. Diamond is on the mark when he says, “irrational behavior often arises when each of us individually is torn by clashes of values: *we may*



Author Jared Diamond

ignore a bad status quo because it is favored by some deeply held values to which we cling." [emphasis added] Changing such a mindset is difficult; core values tend to operate at a level below conscious thought. "Perhaps a crux of success or failure as a society is to know which core values to hold on to, and which ones to discard and replace with new values, when times change." Nor will wealth and power provide relief. The lessons of "Maya kings, Greenland Norse chieftains, and Easter Island chiefs" is that "in the long run, such people do not secure their own interests and those of their children if they rule over a collapsing society and merely buy themselves the privilege of being the last to starve or die."

Ignoring the Obvious

What does the future hold? "[B]ecause we are rapidly advancing along this non-sustainable course, the world's environmental problems will get resolved, in one way or another, within the lifetimes of the children and young adults alive today. The only question is whether they will become resolved in pleasant ways of our own choice, or in unpleasant ways not of our choice, such as warfare, genocide, starvation, disease epidemics, and collapses of societies." Does this mean a swift descent into anarchy, violence and even cannibalism as those who remain fight for the last scrap of food, the last tree, the last barrel of oil, the last acre of land unpolluted by toxic waste? Or will the *dénouement* be a long, slow decline as, one by one, resources become exhausted, civilized comforts fade, and pollution strangles living space over the course of tens or hundreds of years? Do we wish to do nothing and have the answer forced on us?

In many respects, the West is in a unique position. Sustainability as a moral issue centers here. China and Japan are instructive. China has begun to clean up its act, but only for its own survival; it

shows little concern for those downwind and downstream. Japan sustains its own environment by over-consuming Third World resources and the commons (e.g. timber, fish, energy). Conversely, the West (which is certainly not without flaws) has both the industry to devise broad solutions and the moral will to proselytize them on a worldwide scale. This is not, as Diamond implies in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, because European germs devour Aztec germs; it is because the West possesses foresight, industry and an inclusive altruism to a degree not found in any other people.

If the problems *Collapse* highlights are to be solved the West must endure intact. Yet, the West courts ruin via Third World immigration. Diamond is no help; he labels the vast migration now underway "unstoppable" and the contributions of these tens of millions "vital to the economy." (Wait a minute; isn't our voracious economy part of the problem?) Democratic forms ensure that once

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non-Westerners gain majority status their behavior patterns will dominate and Western concerns disappear. To survive, the West must discard the suicidal "core value" that impels it to open the floodgates to the "wretched refuse of the teeming world."

Diamond ignores his own advice, that problems are more likely to be solved in homogeneous societies. And for what—to curry favor with the commissars of political correctness? Scarcity dooms cultural Marxism, and its apostles with it. When the lights go out, ethnic cleavage will rule the night, each group seeking to secure the residue for itself rather than joining to forestall the tragedy of the last and greatest of all commons—"the great globe itself." *Collapse* is a masterful exposition of the problems we face, and Jared Diamond is to be praised for his articulate and comprehensive treatment. However, he has left out a vital part of the solution—survival of the group whose skill and will are vital to safeguarding our future. ■