Editorial Reviews

From Scientific American

According to scripture, "How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle" (II Samuel 1:25). To war, Jared Diamond in his new book, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, adds self-inflicted environmental degradation, climate change, disastrous trading relations, and unwise responses to societal problems. In his earlier, Pulitzer Prize–winning Guns, Germs and Steel, Diamond, a professor of geography at the University of California at Los Angeles, celebrated the rise of communities and nations despite microbial and self-imposed adversities. Collapse is the downside of those dynamics, the societies that didn't make it, barely made it, or are destined, as Diamond sees it, for the fall. In this exhaustively researched new book, he presents carefully detailed case histories of failed societies—islands in warmish waters (Easter, Pitcairn, Haiti), an island in coolish waters (Greenland), a continental semidesert (the Anasazi of the Southwest U.S.), a continental tropical forest (the Maya of Mexico). Diamond begins with the failed state of Montana. Montana? Well, a Pulitzer Prize–winning tenured professor can take the liberty of giving priority to his passions. So Diamond the ardent fly-fisherman, defender of ecological pristineness, sympathetic friend of the farming "locals" has come to the sad conclusion that Montana is going to the dogs. Once one of the richest states of the union, it now ranks among the poorest, having squandered its nonrenewable mineral resources and savagely over-logged its forests. Maybe worst of all, some cad put pike into the trout waters. Although Montana is not about to fall off the map, leaving us with 49 states, the elements responsible for its decline are also responsible for societies that have fallen by the wayside. Diamond's central proposition is that wherever these globally disparate societies failed the chief cause had been anthropogenic ecological devastation, especially deforestation, imposed on ecosystems of limited resources. Those other western Americans, the Anasazi, settled in the New Mexico area about A.D. 600. There they built spectacular cliff housing, worked their marginal agricultural land, and chopped down all the trees without any plans for reforestation. Starving to the desperate point of cannibalism, wracked by internecine warfare, they met their end some 600 years later. To the south, the Maya mostly had it all: technological knowledge to build architecturally wonderful cities, writing, and crops of corn. What they did not have were large domestic animals, or the foresight to replant after they clear-cut forests, or the political sense to refrain from inter-city warfare. Mayan soldiers and city dwellers were, as Diamond puts it, "parasites on farmers," who could no longer produce surplus food on their now barren, treeless land. The Maya began to go into decline about A.D. 1000 and said goodbye to the world about 1675, mopped up by the Spanish. Diamond argues that the isolated island societies suffered a similar fate to the Anasazi and Maya for similar reasons. Pitcairn Island, Easter Island and Greenland all collapsed after the settlers had exhausted the fragile food and timber resources. Deforestation was particularly critical; after the larger trees were harvested, nothing was left to make the seagoing canoes needed for voyaging to other sources of food and material and for recruiting new people, especially wives, into their dwindling, interbreeding populations. In these historical accounts of fallen societies, untrammeled population growth did not play a significant role. Not until the section on modern societies with modern troubles does Diamond invoke Malthus, offering Rwanda as the prime Malthusian model of too many people with too little land. He makes an unconventional interpretation of the savage Rwandan conflict. It was not a mutually genocidal affair propelled by ancient hatreds. At the village level the Hutu and Tutsi had lived together amicably—until geometric population growth far exceeded the arithmetic increase in land and improved agricultural technology, fulfilling the thesis of Malthus's 1798 Essay on the Principle of Population. The brutal killing was, according to Diamond, primarily over your neighbor's land, not his tribal affiliation. As the book' s subtitle suggests, there are societies that have come to success by right thought and action. The Japanese, for example, saw the light and preserved and replanted their forests (although they have not renounced their national wood esthetic; the trees now come from the forests of vulnerable states such as Papua New Guinea). The Dominican Republic preserved its forests and prospered. Its neighbor Haiti ravished both land and forests. And look what happened to

them. I wrote these last words while flying home from a National Academy of Sciences meeting called to reconsider bringing back that contentious, effective and dirt-cheap chemical, DDT. Now the choice will have to be made between the ultraconservationists' prohibition of DDT and the equally ardent arguments of a new coterie of American scientists who are demanding the return of DDT to try to halt the carnage of the malaria parasite, which kills two million to three million children and pregnant women every year. Sorry, Professor Diamond, even in our time of enlightened science, societies don't always have an easy, clear choice to survive, let alone succeed. Collapse is a big book, 500-plus pages. It may well become a seminal work, although its plea for societal survival through ecological conservation is rather like preaching to the choir. It is not a page-turner, especially for slow readers of short attention span (like this reviewer). Some of Diamond's "case studies" may be overkilled by overdetail. The last section, on practical lessons, seems disconnected from the central Collapse story and almost constitutes a separate book. But, having discharged the reviewer's obligation to be critical, my recommendation would definitely be to read the book. It will challenge and make you think—long after you have turned that last 500th-plus page.

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