

Are we as a Global Society on the Verge of Collapse?

Terence Jeyaretnam

I am reading an invigorating book called 'Collapse' by Jarred Diamond. Invigorating because you have that moment when you start reading it – and that is the moment where you think *I would have loved to have written this book!* Diamond combines the essences of the rise and fall of civilisations dotted throughout history, with that of present-day environmental calamities like a master chef, delivering an appetising concoction that the audience would lap up. Unlike doomsday scenarios, which are often depressing and sometimes one-sided stories on why the human race will not be sustainable, Diamond gives examples of both past communities that have failed, but also those that have lived sustainably for thousands of years, giving us a glimpse of optimism. He articulates a five-point scale for the success or failure of civilisations – environmental damage, society's response to its environmental problems, climate change, hostile neighbours and friendly trade partners. He puts an all new meaning to the words 'learning from our past'. As the Sunday Telegraph aptly describes, he is 'one of the very few scientists to have changed the way we think about history'.

"The societies that ended up collapsing were (like the Maya) among the most creative and (for a time) advanced and successful of their times...past peoples were neither ignorant bad managers who deserved to be exterminated or dispossessed, nor all-knowing conscientious environmentalists who solved problems that we can't solve today. They were people like us, facing problems broadly similar to those that we now face. They were prone either to succeed or to fail...", lest we forget. One thing is for certain – we have, forever, tested the absorption potential of our planet. We have seen implications of our past actions, albeit at much smaller scales, and yet we walk forth blind. That, I find intriguing.

One example Diamond has left out, for good reason, because he is not that accurate a prophet, is New Orleans, post Hurricane Katrina. The Boston Globe calls Katrina's real name global warming, and predicts that as the atmosphere warms, it will generate longer droughts, more-intense downpours, more-frequent heat waves, and more-severe storms. The Los Angeles Times reports that the destructive power of hurricanes had increased 50% over the last half a century, and that a rise in surface temperatures linked to global warming was at least partly responsible. New Orleans may never be re-built – collapsed before I managed to experience the jazz, just as we missed the sun-worship of the Inca and the statue building of the Easter Islanders.

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