



Considering the Human Factor in Collapse and Decline

Eric Plourde
Université de Montréal

The arguments brought forth by the authors in this issue have led us to realize that collapse and decline must be defined before any attempt to understand their dynamics. By defining decline and collapse we mean re-situating these phenomena within their specific social, historical and cultural contexts that vary to a large degree from one society to another. Furthermore, the processes of decline and collapse themselves must carry an epithet to distinguish them from the other processes of social transformation. For example, political collapse does not entail, nor does it emulate, economic collapse. Hence, the importance of approaching different types of collapse – whether political, economical or cultural – using, in each case, the appropriate analytical tools.

Studies focusing on phenomena of civilizational decline and collapse have had many ramifications on the way we conceive societies and social structure. Decline and collapse have long been imagined and seen through the prism of the rise and fall of ancient empires, such as the Roman or Mayan civilizations. However my readings of recent literature in this field lead me to argue that there has been a shift in paradigm that we can attribute to more recent and tangible experiences of collapse, such as the political collapse of the Soviet Union, and the

economic collapse of Argentina – which was not supposed to happen, according to economists and financial experts.

While these two collapses did not operate on the same level and did not affect their respective populations in the same manner, both have provoked a renewed interest in the phenomenon of collapse and a palpable sense of urgency, especially from the perspective of today's industrialized and geopolitically dominant societies, such as the United States. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the recent books on collapse and decline that have attracted the most attention happen to be written by North American scholars. This might also partly explain the general catastrophist tone that most contemporary studies of collapse seem to share, a trend that has been closely examined by the authors in this issue. This sense of imminent catastrophe on the horizon has, nevertheless, fostered a desire to understand the underlying processes of collapse, if only to give hints and prescriptions as to how to avoid such an outcome.

It is from this perspective that contributions by authors such as Joseph Tainter (1988), followed by Jane Jacobs (2004), Jared Diamond (2004) and Ian Bremmer (2006) should be read. In his groundbreaking book, which he aptly titled, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988), Tainter focused his research on the collapse of essentially urbanized populations from an economic point of view. From a mainly ecological perspective (today's principal paradigm for collapse theories), the best-selling book by Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Succeed or Fail* (2004) has, by contrast, brought under the umbrella term of « collapse » a much greater variety of past situations, citing populations that range from the few thousands to the few millions. Although the issues Diamond raises bring us to reconsider the causes of civilizational collapse, his definitions of the phenomenon are not as clearly cut as those found in Tainter's book. This shortcoming has quite justifiably been underlined and criticized by Strohm, Vitenti and Blain in this issue. This opens up many questions raised by those authors – no doubt Diamond would be happy about this – especially on his choice of examples.

There lies, in my eyes, and in the eyes of the aforementioned authors, the main bone of contention: How collapse or decline experts select their examples to illustrate or prove their theory should be carefully examined. To further illustrate my point, it is worth taking a closer look at another work of interest mentioned above, Ian Bremmer's *J Curve: A New Way to Understand Why Nations Rise and Fall* (2006), which focuses on the political aspect of rise and fall, but from the point of view of U.S. foreign policy. His work, lauded by many political observers, clearly defines his object of study and refers to specific cases but compares nevertheless vastly different political entities, basically trying to fit those cases into an already well-established

thesis. There is, in fact, a general tendency in this genre of scholarly literature to select certain examples while excluding those that might drive a wedge in their respective theses.

Knowing that, one is inclined to ask the following: Can we really draw lessons and sets of applicable rules from the experiences of past societies to help us prevent the collapse of our industrialized and energivorous societies? And if so, which societies? Could we draw a parallel between the situation of the Garamantes in the Sahara region¹, who saw increasingly diminishing returns on their investments in collecting water by drilling ever deeper in the surrounding mountains until they ran out, to the imminent collapse of the Western world, which is seeing increasingly diminishing returns on its investments in collecting petroleum by drilling ever deeper in oceans and politically unstable lands?

Diamond attempts to draw just such a parallel between the Easter Islanders' demise because of their series of bad economic choices in managing their environment on an isolated island, and our own possible demise if we continue an "inefficient" management of our environment on our isolated planet. Using Diamond's own arguments I would say that the Easter Islanders have proven to be just that, very efficient in their management of their environment, too efficient as to precipitate the depletion of their resources. Could we be just now doing exactly what the Easter Islanders have done to their environment? Diamond does not explicitly state this but alludes to it.

Sometimes, if not often, the very mechanisms we have thought up to solve one problem cause another, or the solutions aggravate the very problem they try to solve. Transposing that argument to the political register, Sophie Lemoyne-Dessaint's research note on the various measures put in place by the Colombian government to secure a border area are quite eloquent in that regard. Indeed, securing the border in order to prevent political collapse or decline has only fostered more insecurity especially in neighboring Ecuador. Such a dynamic should not be ignored by those who seek fast and effective prescriptions to complex situations where collapse or decline seems imminent.

So what can be the specific contribution of the anthropologist in this debate? While archaeologists have centered their discipline on the study of past societies, ethnologists have only recently begun to show

¹ The Garamantes are a pre-roman population of sedentary pastoralists that lived in the Northern Sahara region, in what is today southern Libya and Tunisia. They had built a vibrant community by digging in the surrounding mountains to irrigate their fields. After they experienced increasingly severe water shortages, their social fabric disintegrated and they even lost their own memory of their vast 'empire' to the point where their descendants attribute Garamantes constructions to Roman engineering.

interest in the large scale trials and tribulations of past and contemporary societies. In this issue, Meunier draws from both approaches in order to go beyond the archeological analysis of the phenomenon itself and focus on the dialectic between academic and native discourses of collapse, exposing the alarmist tone of academic experts when faced with the economic endeavors of the natives.

This case confirms what Jane Jacobs argues in her book, *Dark Age Ahead* (2004): That the most important factor in collapse or decline is the human factor. Her point might constitute, in my view, the core of future anthropological studies of collapse and decline. While it is important to include biogeographical, or environmental variables in the equation, the idiosyncrasies and variety of both the human factors and ecosystems implicated in cases of collapse tend to get in the way of theory. In this sense, recent cases such as those of the Soviet Union and Argentina, provide us with a valuable opportunity to explore this human factor.

I would argue that, as anthropologists, it is part of our work, if not our duty, to give those who have experienced decline and collapse first hand a voice and a more equal and participative role in our collective understanding of a human phenomenon that is intriguing, fascinating and sometimes as frightening as it is enlightening.

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*Eric Plourde
Doctorant
Département d'anthropologie
Université de Montréal
le_thaumaturge@yahoo.com*