



(Co)lapsing: Or, Making Sense

Kiven Strohm
Université de Montréal et Amsterdam
School for Cultural Analysis

Why do some societies disappear? More importantly, why do many choose to disappear? After a series of historical examples of societies that have collapsed and disappeared due to environmental carelessness and/or an unwillingness to change their relationship with their environments, Jared Diamond, the author of *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, asserts that we too face unprecedented environmental challenges that, if ignored, will threaten our existence. If truth be told, our present environmental challenges are not dissimilar to those faced by the people of Easter Island and the Greenland Norse, only now they threaten to occur on a global scale. In fact, it is the lessons of the past and their parallels with the present that are crucial for Diamond. As he polemically states:

It is not a question open for debate whether the collapses of past societies have modern parallels and offer any lessons to us. That question is settled, because such collapses have actually been happening recently, and others appear imminent (Diamond 2004:517).

Diamond acknowledges that there are differences to be taken into consideration, such as greater historical documentation/awareness and improved technical capabilities, but he underscores that these differences don't buttress the present from the possibility of collapse, but actually enhance such possibilities. While scientific and historical "facts" are being hotly contested, the advances of technical intervention, more often than not, are having increasingly harmful impacts on the natural environment. All of these differences, in other

words, rather than ameliorating our precarious environmental situation, are creating a larger negative impact. Important to Diamond's overall argument is the belief that the environmental problems of the present day are not merely local problems, the concern of particular countries or societies. Rather, the problems facing us today are global in reach. As he puts it:

The problems of all these environmentally devastated, overpopulated, distant countries become our own problems because of globalization. We are accustomed to thinking of globalization in terms of us rich advanced First Worlders sending our things, such as the Internet and Coca-Cola, to those poor backward Third Worlders (Diamond 2004:517).

What happens in Rwanda, Burundi, or the Solomon Islands, can affect us, the First Worlders. Their environmental problems, their overreaching populations, their devastation of natural resources, their diseases – the things that have embroiled so many of them in wars and conflicts – touch us, our lives, our well-being. And, of course, we contribute a fair share of “bad things” to Third World countries, such as refuse in the form of chemicals, electronic trash, deforestation, not to mention guns and bombs. Globalization has changed the world, our world and theirs, such that today it is impossible to ignore that we are no longer an “isolated fortress” but irreversibly connected with other countries, with other peoples, with other histories (Diamond 2004:518). Equally significant, as can be seen in the case of many of the war torn areas of the world, is a deep connection between environmental problems and political instability. Diamond notes, with the aid of map supplements, that most of the politically unstable countries in the world today are also facing deep and protracted environmental problems:

Today, just as in the past, countries that are environmentally stressed, overpopulated, or both become at risk of getting politically stressed, and of their governments collapsing. When people are desperate, undernourished, and without hope, they blame their governments, which they see as responsible for or unable to solve their problems. They try to emigrate at any cost. They fight each other over the land. They kill each other. They start civil wars. They figure that they have nothing to lose, so they become terrorists, or they support or tolerate terrorism (Diamond 2004:516).

A truly dire situation, for them and us. The interconnectedness of our world with theirs, of their suffering with our relative well-being, makes their problems our problems. The world is undeniably a smaller place. On the face of it, there appears to be little to quarrel with in Diamond's argument. Or is there?

A significant challenge to Diamond's position comes in J. R. McNeill's review in the journal *International Security* (2005). According to McNeill, many of the issues raised by Diamond as to why we today face the possibility of societal collapse are open to debate. To begin, McNeill questions whether the past has anything to teach us about the present; that is, whether past collapses have any contemporary relevance (McNeill 2005:182). The second objection made by McNeill is based on Diamond's choice of relatively isolated and small-scale societies. McNeill's concern here is that Diamond's portrait of societal collapse is made too easy by his choice to not examine such cases as “the Roman Empire, or the city-states of Harappa or Mohenjodaro, or

any of a number of states of ancient Mesopotamia” (McNeill 2005:183). McNeill’s point is that, unlike the isolated and small-scale societies Diamond did examine, these larger more complex examples have more in common with the contemporary world. Nevertheless, despite these concerns McNeill acknowledges that there is nonetheless “much that can be gleaned” from Diamond’s examples. McNeill’s third objection concerns the interrelation of environmental degradation and political strife. At issue for McNeill is the idea put forward by Diamond that environmental factors are at the heart of the various political trouble spots around the world. At this point McNeill makes an important clarification in Diamond’s argument. He highlights what he calls Diamond’s more “cautious” claim that ‘today’s societies are at risk of collapse and environmental degradation plays a role’ (McNeill 2005:186). This is an important intervention, and an aspect of Diamond’s argument that needs to be underlined. The linearity of Diamond’s claim that environmental collapse will precipitate political instability and, in turn, social collapse is deeply problematic. In fact, it smacks of determinism, which is to say, one-sided materialism. The problem, as McNeill hints and Diamond mildly and hesitatingly suggests, is not uni-linear, but dialectical. The idea here is not to dismiss Diamond’s insights, nor to ignore those “cautious moments” where he acknowledges that politics can lead to environmental problems. The point is simply that this is not the dominant logic of Diamond’s text, which is that it is the environment that, more often than not, causes political strife. While McNeill raises a number of important issues regarding Diamond’s argument, it is this final point that intrigues me the most, though, as I will clarify below, not for the same reasons as McNeill.

The Politics of the “We”

“We” has traditionally been the pronoun of choice for popes, kings, and queens; it comes with the territory of the office.
Marianna Torgovnick 1994

I must admit that in my overview of Diamond’s *Collapse* I have perhaps overemphasized his use of the “we”. Truth be told, it was intentional. One of the things that struck me is Diamond’s use and deployment of “we,” both as an invitation to the reader to become part of the debate and discussion, and, more importantly, to draw boundaries (it is clear at certain points in his text that the “we” refers to people in the United States). It is this latter aspect that I have tended to emphasize so far in my discussion with the aim of provoking a disquiet regarding Diamond’s conception of a globally interconnected world. I now want to turn more directly to this usage of “we” to draw attention to the political aspects of how societies collapse. I sense there to be a connection, or at least I will attempt to make such a connection, between the political circumstances that lead to environmental and social disintegration and the boundaries that are being drawn by the use of “we”.

As the Dutch cultural analyst Mieke Bal has plainly and accurately put it, the use of the “we” is a political act, an act of inclusion as well as exclusion (Bal 2002). Her concerns stem from the fact that too many cultural critics use this term “we” without being aware of its political effects. My sense is that although Diamond uses the term non-reflexively, unaware of its rhetorical and political effects, it plays a crucial role in supporting his argument that it is the reality of environmental collapse that leads to and causes political struggle. It will be recalled that one of the concerns raised by McNeill regarding Diamond’s argument is that he tends to give favor or precedence to environmental circumstances when attempting to explain political strife (putting aside Diamond’s more “cautious moments”). Indeed, when Diamond does explain the intimate connection between environmental and political trouble spots, this logic blatantly is clear. Yet, what is also blatantly clear is an almost comical, if not ironic, use of a “we-they” or “us-them” rhetoric. It is worth repeating:

When people are desperate, undernourished, and without hope, they blame their governments, which they see as responsible for or unable to solve their problems. They try to emigrate at any cost. They fight each other over land. They kill each other. They start civil wars. They figure that they have nothing to lose, so they become terrorists, or they support or tolerate terrorism (Diamond 2004:516).

The rhetoric in this passage is unflinching and unabashed. Their political problems are the result of a destroyed and overstretched environment. True, their problems become our problems because of globalization, and it must be admitted that “we” contribute to these horrific environmental conditions with our garbage and waste (Diamond 2004:517). Yet, in my opinion, this logic is disingenuous. Excluded, removed, erased, are the complex histories of colonialism, neo-liberal policies, puppet governments, the poverty and destitution that has resulted from International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank blackmail. To reiterate, the rhetorical effect of the “we-them” allows Diamond to bypass and gloss over the global politics that are at work in many of the political trouble spots around the world. This disingenuous logic is further extended when Diamond asserts that countries that are well-nourished do not offer support to terrorists; in other words, terrorism is the product of desperate societies, not those that are well-off. If this is true, why are these societies so desperate? What has made their environments so inhabitable that they feel impelled to turn to armed struggle and resistance? My point is that the “we-they” dichotomy that Diamond continually invokes in his argument is a rhetorical device employed to ward off culpability and responsibility for the politics of “our” global inter-connectedness.

So far it is clear that there is a political vein to be reckoned with in the debate over why some societies choose to fail. At the same time, my aim in taking on a politics of the “we” is to adjoin to this political question an ethical dimension. Diamond’s evocation of “we” reflects a long-standing idea of what is human and what is not (quite) human. It reiterates, in other words, the politics of Western humanism. “We” are human, “they,” the other is not. Of course, Diamond does not say this, and I do not make any claim that this is what he is suggesting. My point, rather, is that the use of “we” is deeply bound up with a humanism that is premised on the idea that “we” are all the same,

regardless of religion, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, language. But the “we” of humanism has been anything but neutral in this regard. Consider the example of the *International Declaration of the Rights of Man* as it pertains to the history of slavery in the United States, or current United States policies regarding “enemy combatants,” and, similarly, treatment of refugees, migrants, exiles, or more generally those without papers. All of these are examples of a politics of inclusion and exclusion based on a “we” and, more deeply, on a politics of what it is to be human. All, in fact, are premised on the idea of what is human and therefore worthy of rights. Women, Afro-Americans, Palestinians, have been, or still are, examples of political exclusion. The all-inclusive ideal of humanism is never a given, as Susan Maslan recently made evident in quoting a passage from eighteenth-century Abbé Henri Grégoire where he states: “J’ai toujours cru qu’ils [Jews] étaient hommes [Human beings]; vérité triviale, mais qui n’est pas encore démontrée pour ceux qui les traitent en bêtes de somme, et qui n’en parlent que sur le ton de mépris ou de la haine” (Maslan 2004:357).

La fin du sens

...la responsabilité ne doit-elle pas s’annoncer toujours dans une langue étrangère à ce que la communauté peut déjà entendre, trop bien entendre? Jacques Derrida, 1992

What has become apparent over the course of the twentieth century is the idea that the constitutive political narrative of humanism has slowly but surely been eroded, undermined and disturbed. This is not to say that the narrative of humanism is exhausted, and that other narratives have supplanted it. To put it in different terms, there is no jumping out of humanism into something called post-humanism. Such a break is difficult, if not impossible, given that the language by which to escape humanism, to step beyond (*au-delà*), is the language of humanism itself. In other words, to the degree that we are bound and permeated by the language with which we take part in the world, there is no outside to which we can leap. Despite this paradoxical, or more precisely, aporetic condition, there is no excuse for us to acquiesce to the status quo, to the conservative and exclusionary politics of humanism. Indeed, once we recognize that the language of humanism is not self-identical, that is, not without ellipses, gaps, and exclusions, we are encouraged to begin from within. If there is such a thing as “post-humanism,” it would have to be located in this movement of opposition, of putting the political narrative of humanism into question.

None of us can evade or sidestep these questions. To simply lie down and accept the status quo would be tantamount to accepting how the political narrative of humanism has worked as an act of exclusion, in some cases perpetuating violence. In this sense, humanism is not unlike the politics of the “we.” Two questions are at issue here: First, is an

ethically grounded conception of humanism necessary to the well-being of a society, such that without it there is the threat of social disintegration, and, in turn, collapse? The second question concerns the fate of humanism. If a conception of humanism is deemed necessary to the well-being of society, and hence an important bulwark against collapse, what does such a humanism look like today, when its status as a political narrative of modernity is being undermined?

Much of the bellyaching about the critique of humanism rests on the assumption that such criticism invites a sort of nihilism, an utter repudiation of sense and meaning. For critics such as Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, in *La pensée 68*, the anti-humanism found in the work of Michel Foucault and other post-structuralist thinkers sorely lacks substance and is therefore unable to address the “crisis of sense” that confronts contemporary society. In reaction, Ferry and Renaut call for a “return” to the Enlightenment principles espoused by such figures as Immanuel Kant. But, the “crisis of sense” that permeates contemporary society, the idea that since the political narratives of modernity are corrupt there is no longer any meaning, cannot be remedied through a return to the past, as if somehow it were possible to forget and bracket everything that has transpired since – historically, socially, politically, scientifically, and philosophically. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, if the loss of sense today (*la fin du sens*) is a loss of absolute values – of transcendental worldviews, beliefs, myths – this loss is nonetheless an opening of sense (Nancy 2001). In other words, “we” is the opening wherein the sense of the world is exposed. At the heart of “we” is a being-with (*être-avec*), what Nancy refers to as co-appearance (*comparution*) through which meaning is unendingly created and circulated. As such, sense does not pre-exist its circulation, its exposing in the relation between singularities, and therefore it is not something that can be lost and returned to (there is no pre-existing sense). Thus, rather than calling for a return to the past, there is a responsibility to recognize that it is we humans who make sense in and through our being-with, and that it is this circulation of sense, of meaning, that is the “we” itself, our common belonging.

Returning to Diamond’s use of “we” and “they,” surely such an opposition is not only unjustified politically but unwarranted ethically? In this sense, it is not merely a matter of stating that “their” problems become “our” problems, but of how these problems are always already everyone’s problems. When “they” turn to terrorism, the issue is not an “us” and “them,” a “clash of civilizations,” but a recognition of and responsibility to the space of our being-in-common [*être-en-commun*]. Thus, as we begin to recognize our being-in-common, this community prior to all communities, McNeill’s caution that politics often precedes environmental collapse takes on further significance. Indeed, as anthropologists, there is, as Derrida refers to it, a responsibility before all responsibilities, before all political and ethical calculations, to remain vigilant neighbours of this political space and the “we” that emerges and circulates within it.

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Résumé/Abstract

Lorsqu'il est question de l'effondrement d'une société ou d'une civilisation, ces événements tendent à être expliqués en les liant à des conditions matérielles. Cette approche est évidente dans l'ouvrage de Jared Diamond (2006[2004]), *Effondrement : comment les sociétés décident de leur disparition ou de leur survie*, où l'auteur associe la disparition de différentes sociétés à leur refus de s'adapter à leurs environnements. Derrière la logique du « nous » versus les « autres » qui traverse l'ouvrage de Diamond, se cache pourtant une dimension politique et éthique que l'auteur n'aborde pas. Dans cet article je tente de dénouer brièvement cette logique en proposant une réflexion renouvelée sur le sens du « nous » et ses responsabilités.

Mots clés : Nous, politique, sens, responsabilité

When speaking of civilizational or societal collapse, there is a tendency to look to explanations that are material in nature. This tendency is readily apparent in the recent and popular book from Jared Diamond (2004), *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. While Diamond notes the human potential to not change and adapt to their environments, his argument is laden with a logic of the “we” and “they” that obfuscates the political and ethical dimensions of why societies are presently facing collapse. In what follows, I briefly try to undo this logic by rethinking our sense of “we” and the responsibility it entails.

Keywords: We, politics, sense, responsibility

*Kiven Strohm
Doctorant
Département d'anthropologie
Université de Montréal
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis
kivenstrohm@gmail.com*