

THE COLLAPSE OF SOCIETIES - HOW AND WHY THEY FAIL OR SUCCEED

Coordinators: Michael Hill and Eric R. Roper

Since agriculture was invented, complex societies have formed and grown using human and natural resources. These societies changed and often prospered but many, even of the most successful, ultimately failed or disappeared. The causes for failure include war, resource deprivation, inadequate institutions, ecological change and poor decision-making. The study group starts with some of the factors that make societies successful and then examines a diverse set of collapsed societies including the Western Roman Empire, Mycenaean Greece, Easter Island, the lowland Maya, the Anasazi in New Mexico and others to look in more detail at the causes and paths of failures and to test ideas about how contemporary societies may respond to demographic, ecological or political problems that could cause failure.

Readings and other Required Materials:

Jared Diamond: *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*
{Rev. Edition. 2011. ISBN 978-0-14-311700-1 pbk}

Also PDFs and video files available on Study Group Website.

Michael Hill joined the IRP in January 2014 and has coordinated study groups on European Socialism and Income Inequality. **Eric R. Roper**, an IRP member since 2013, practiced law for 48 years is now pleased to be co-coordinating his first study group with Michael Hill.

* * * * * **Syllabus - A Work in Progress** * * * * *

Week 1: How societies evolve from “simple” to “complex”.

Readings:

PDFs: Hebert Gintis and Carel van Schaik. “The Evolutionary Roots of Human Sociopolitical Systems”. Pp.25-44.

Peter Turchin “ How Did Large-Scale Complex Societies Evolve?” pp: 61-73

For discussion.

What constitutes a 'simple society?'
How does it begin to alter its character?
When does the concept of "state" apply?

Week 2: Defining societal success and failure.

Readings:

PDF: Peter Turcheon "War and Peace and War: The Life Cycles of Imperial Nations." Introduction and chapter 1 pp.: 1-29.

For discussion.

How do complex societies become and stay empires?

Why do societies sometimes not anticipate problems that lead to collapse?

When problems are anticipated why are they often not solved?

Week 3: Social collapse--an overview.

Readings:

PDF: Joseph Tainter "The Collapse of Complex Societies." Pp. 5: - 31,43-71 and 89-90.

For discussion.

Explain these generic models for collapse- "the Dinosaur" (large scale resource depletion), "the Runaway Train" (constant growth) and "the House of Cards" large unstable complex social institutions.

What are common factors for social failure according to Tainter?

How would you compare resource depletion and foreign intruders/invasions?

Week 4: Social collapse—some examples – from the Hittites, Rome, and Incas to Cahokia (N. America) and Aboriginal Tasmanians.

Readings:

PDFs: Turchin, "The Many Declines of the Roman Empire" pp. 285-308. Tainter, "Intruders" pp.61- 64. "Conflict/mismanagement" 65-73.

For discussion.

How did the Roman Empire undergo simplification and reversion?

Are the Aztecs and Incans good examples of collapse by absorption?

Why?

What kinds of societies are most susceptible to extinction?

Week 5: Case study– Easter Islands and resource depletion.

Readings:

Diamond, pp. 79-119.

For discussion.

How were the very remote Easter Islands first settled?

How and why were the Moai statues built, moved and installed?

How did ecological disaster lead to the population crash on the Easter Islands?

Week 6: Case study--Mayan Civilization, hostile neighbors and environmental collapse.

Reading:

Diamond, pp.157-178.

For discussion.

What was the chronology of Mayan growth, crisis, recovery and collapse?

How does the example of Copan illustrate the primary factors leading to Mayan collapse?

What was the role of the Spanish in the Mayan collapse?

Week 7: Case study—The Anasazi and ‘abandonment’.

Readings:

Diamond,pp.136-156. PDFs: TBD”.

For discussion.

Why was the Chaco Canyon site ideal site for settlement?

How did water mismanagement, deforestation, drought and population growth combine for disaster?

How and why was the evacuation of the Chacon Canyon done? Was it “planned?”

Week 8: Case study — The Norse Saga, Vikings in Greenland and Iceland.

Readings:

Diamond, pp. 178-210 and 248-276.

For discussion.

Why was settlement in Iceland unsuccessful?

Why did the settlers abandon Iceland?

What was the Inuit role in Viking Greenland?

Week 9: Making success out of challenges. New Guinea, Tikopia and Japan.

Readings:

Diamond, pp. 277-309. PDFs: TBD.

For discussion.

Explain “bottom up” and “top down” approaches to solving environmental problems.

How did “bottom up” approaches work in New Guinea? How did the top down approaches in Japan and Tikopia differ?

Week 10: Data and ideas -- explaining collapse.

Readings:

Diamond. PDFs. TBD.

For discussion.

Are there common factors for all the societal collapses we have looked at? Do you think political, economic or ecological problems are generally more likely to cause collapse? Is societal collapse contingent or a necessary part of cultural evolution? Are there “laws” of societal decay?

Week 11: Making decisions: why some societies make good ones and others don't.

Readings:

Diamond, pp. 419-440. PDFs: TBD.

For discussion.

What are examples of societies that faced problems looked for solutions and attempted them?

What factors lead to successful solutions?

Why are some societies unable to attempt solutions? Are self-interest or cooperation more important for successful social decision-making?

Are some problems insolvable under any circumstances?

Week 12: The future as history, where are we headed?

Reading:

TBD.

For discussion.

Are historical or sociological theories on social collapse relevant to modern advanced societies? Would we agree that ecological and environmental problems are the most likely to cause social collapse in the 21st century? What sort of political institutions will be most

useful to avoiding multiple social collapses if human-threatening global climate changes happen over a 30-40 year period? Over a 5-10 year period?