

A Word on Civilization & Collapse

“Th-th-th-that’s all folks!” Has the human race’s grandest achievement—civilization—assured its collapse? It doesn’t look good!

John Zerzan

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Civilizations have come and gone over the past 6,000 years or so. Now, there’s just one—various cultures, but a single, global civilization.

Collapse is in the air. We’ve already seen the failure, if not the collapse, of culture in the West. The Holocaust alone, in the most cultured country (philosophy, music, etc.), revealed culture’s impotence.

We have a better idea of what civilization is than we do of what collapse would mean. It’s the standard notion: domestication of plants and animals, soon followed by the early, major civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Domestication, the ground and thrust of civilization, per se: the ethos of ever-progressing domination of nature and control in general.

“Nature has not ordained civilization; quite the contrary,” as E.J. Applewhite, a Buckminster Fuller collaborator, aptly observed. All civilizations have been riven with tensions, and all heretofore have failed. Mayan and Mycenaean civilizations, half a world apart, collapsed simultaneously (if slowly). Egyptian civilization rose and fell four times before it exhausted itself.

Arnold Toynbee examined some twenty past civilizations in his massive *A Study of History*, and found that in every case, the cause of collapse was internal, not external.

What may be civilization’s deepest tension is brought out in that most radical text, Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*. For Freud, civilization rests on a primary repression, the source of unconquerable unhappiness: the trading of instinctual freedom and eros for work and symbolic culture. Thus, civilization’s very foundation, domestication, is the worst of bargains, the basic generator of neurosis.

Oswald Spengler underlined the futility of civilization, deciding that it was undesirable, even evil. For anthropologist Roy Rappaport, maladaptive was the adjective that best described it, though he (like the rest) concluded that smaller, self-sufficient social orders would be as undesirable as they would be impossible to achieve.

In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler noted that the last phases of every civilization are marked by increasing technological complexity. This is strikingly true of planetary culture today, when we also see technology’s claims and promises tending to displace those of explicitly political ideology.

William Ophuls’ recent *Immoderate Greatness: Why Civilizations Fail* outlines quite ably the reasons why civilizational failure is inevitable, why the grasping control ethos of domestication comes to its self-defeating end. The book’s first sentence also serves very well to announce the fatal illusion that prevails today: “Modern civilization believes it commands the historical process with technological power.”

The fallacy of this belief is becoming clearer to more people. After all, as Jared Diamond puts it, “All of our current problems are unintended consequences of our existing technology.” In fact, civilization is failing on every level, in every sphere, and its failure equates so largely with the failure of technology. More and more, this is what people understand as collapse.

Complex societies are recent in human history, and certainly this over-arching civilization is very different from all that have gone before. The main differences are twofold. Reigning civilization now dominates the entire globe, various cultural differences notwithstanding, and technological invasiveness colonizes to an undreamed-of degree.

Despite this reach and height, the rule of civilization is based on less and less. Inner nature is as ravaged as outer nature. The collapse of human connectedness has opened the door to unimaginable phenomena among lonely human populations. The extinction of species, melting polar ice, vanishing ecosystems, etc., proceed without slowing.

Fukushima, acidifying oceans, Monsanto, fracking, disappearing bees, ad infinitum. Even rather more prosaic aspects of civilization are in decline.

Rappaport found that as civilizational systems “become increasingly large and powerful, the quality and utility of their products are likely to deteriorate.” The massive mid-2014 recall of millions of GM, Toyota, and Ford cars comes to mind. Jared Diamond points out that “steep decline may begin only a decade or two after the society reaches its peak numbers.”

Enter Peak Oil and its prediction that oil is beginning to run out, signaling the finale of industrial civilization and its ruinous run. The discovery of large reserves of natural gas and new technological processes (e.g., shale gas extraction) may, however, mean that the Peak Oil projection of terminal decline won’t begin for many decades. The Oil Drum website, a major Peak Oil forum, went silent in 2008 after an eight-year run, admitting to lack of interest.

There is an understandable, if misplaced, desire that civilization will cooperate with us and deconstruct itself. This mind set seems especially prevalent among those who shy away from resistance, from doing the work of opposing civilization. There is also a tendency to see a dramatic showdown looming, even though history rarely seems to provide us with such a scenario.

Things are dire, and worsening. So we also see more and more pessimism and even surrender, although the former does not always lead to the latter. There will be no big happy ending, counsels the anonymously-penned 2011 offering, the book *Desert*. It tells us that the picture of a single global present is an illusion, mirrored by the illusion of a single, global liberated future.

But as civilization moves steadily toward a unitary, globalized, highly integrated reality, the first assertion looks demonstrably in error. As for the second, we have no idea what will happen; nonetheless it seems self-evident that either we will overcome the domestication/civilization paradigm or we won’t. Not that the struggle will likely be decided in one fell swoop.

Desert presents much in terms of the limits of activism, but is that where all will be decided? It provides little or no analysis or vision, and thus ignores what may be crucial: legitimation. We are already seeing signs of de-legitimation as awareness grows that civilization is doomed, and civilization’s loyalists have no answers to a widening crisis. Things get worse, and civilization makes things worse. It is failing, and we have crucial questions and understanding as to why.

More importantly, a qualitatively different paradigm or vision is possible, and even available. It is not surprising that *Desert* puts forth a life-boat approach, however unrealistic overall, or that Dark Mountain’s well-known UK environmentalist, Paul Kingsworth, flat-out throws in the towel.

It looks bad, but civilization’s prospects increasingly appear even worse: no future. We need to put forth the effort to bring it to an end.

The direction is clear: “a return to the normal human condition of lower complexity,” in anthropologist Joseph Tainter’s words in his 1988 *The Collapse of Complex Societies*.

Toward life, health, community, a face-to-face world of robust, re-skilled individuals.

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