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Review of Jared Diamond's "Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed"

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ABSTRACT: This article is a review and critique of Jared Diamond's new book "Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed." I summarize the author's major case studies and theoretical arguments. Then I develop a critique of his treatment of our contemporary environmental crisis, specifically his analysis of the tendencies within our modern economy impelling us toward collapse and his prescriptions to avoid collapse. I argue that Diamond fails to apply the same mode of analysis to modern capitalist economies that he applies so successfully to the analysis of the internal social/class conflict dynamics that led to collapse in Easter Island Society, the Greenland Norse, Mayan society and others. I argue that Diamond's recommendations — to buy "green," support "consumer boycotts" etc. while helpful, are demonstrably failing to solve and cannot solve the big problems like global warming, pollution, etc. or to halt the slide toward collapse. That is because the only way to escape collapse is to drastically reduce economic growth, cut absolutely the amount of emissions, pollution, logging, fishing, etc. and also to massively restructure production toward production for social need instead of for endless consumption. Yet our corporate chiefs, however well intentioned, are powerless to adopt policies that slow down growth or restructure production because they must enforce the will and short-term interests of their shareholders for higher profits and not the general and long-term interests of society as a whole. Yet I argue, if we don't slow down the global economy and drastically restructure the global economy, we are indeed doomed as Diamond says. Therefore, I conclude, a real solution will require a different kind of economy, a bottom-up democratic self-governing socialist economy.

There is a compelling moment in Joel Bakan's film The Corporation in which Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface, Inc. (the world's largest producer of commercial floor

coverings) and born-again environmentalist, likens his sense of our growing environmental crisis to skydiving: When one first jumps out of the airplane at five thousand feet or so the ground seems so far away and for long minutes as you plunge earthward, it still seems far away. But then very soon the ground is rushing up at you at terrific speed and you have to put on the brakes, release the parachute — or die. The global environmental crisis, says Anderson, is "coming at us" like that. Forty years ago Rachel Carson launched the environmental movement with her eloquent pleas against pesticide pollution, lost songbirds and the emerging cancer epidemic. Yet Carson's warnings pale before the staggering scope of the global environmental crisis we face today as entire planetary ecosystems teeter on the verge of collapse: Ocean fisheries, temperate and tropical forests, arctic ecologies, coral reefs, fresh clean rivers and lakes, a breathable atmosphere, a tolerable climate — ecosystems that were built up over eons and eons of time, are now being plundered and consumed, polluted and developed to death in a biohistorical blink of an eye. For decades, environmentalists who warned of these impending disasters were dismissed as extremists and alarmists. No more. Today, all the mainstream of scientific organizations, notable corporate CEOs, Tony Blair, the Archbishop of Canterbury, even the U.S. Pentagon are all calling for something to be done to avert the onrushing threat of global warming, among other dire threats.

Now Jared Diamond, Pulitzer Prize winning author of Guns, Germs and Steel (1997) has given us a provocative and fascinating history lesson in what could happen, even to our technologically advanced society, should we fail to learn from and apply the lessons of past failed societies. In "Collapse: How Societies Choose or Fail to Succeed," Diamond takes us on a sobering reality tour of six societies that committed ecological suicide in the hopes that we can learn from their failures in time to save ourselves. Diamond's thesis is that societies such as the Easter Islanders, the Greenland Norse, the Anasazi of the American southwest, the Lowland Mayans and others collapsed largely because they exhausted the natural resources on which they depended and failed to realize the need to change, or, inexplicably, refused to change and instead pursued "grim trajectories" toward social and economic disintegration and collapse, while other societies facing comparable circumstances, such as the Tikopians and Tongans of the south Pacific, the Highland tribes of New Guineans, the Japanese under the Tokugawa, survived because, Diamond says, they broke with previously tightly held social "core values," and made the "correct" decisions about reversing long-term negative environmental trends and/or adapted to difficult or changed environmental conditions. So they replanted depleted forests, conserved eroding soils, changed their diet and adopted such other reforms as were necessary to save themselves from collapse and maintain a sustainable environmental base for future generations. In Diamond's view, we moderns now stand on such a precipice with human survival as a species at risk because of our unsustainable consumption of resources. Overdriving the environment is already plunging some societies like Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, and Congo toward collapse. But we in the advanced industrial societies are, if anything, in even greater danger because of our huge impact on the planet's environment: "For the first time in history, we face the risk of global decline. But we also are the first to enjoy the opportunity of learning quickly from developments in societies anywhere else in the world today, and from what has unfolded in societies at any time in the past"(p. 23).

Diamond's previous comparative study of the environmental bases of the rise of the west, Guns, Germs and Steel remains the best selling academic book of all time. Collapse seems likely to become an even bigger blockbuster. But Collapse goes beyond an academic study in comparative history in that it seeks to bring additional intellectual ammunition to the side of environmental activists by popularizing the history of past societal collapses as a huge warning to those who control our own future. Given the author's notoriety, Diamond has the potential to make a significant impact on popular consciousness. But having said that, with all due respect to an important book, I am nevertheless going to argue here that when it comes to his treatment of our current crisis and his recommendations for how we moderns might stave off collapse - which is, after all, his declared purpose for the book - the book is severely handicapped ironically by Diamond's reluctance to break with his own outmoded cultural "core values." I will try to show why Diamond's faith in the free market and the potential for reforming the market system before it destroys us is naïve and unfounded. And I will challenge the notion, embodied in the subtitle of his book, that society is free to "choose to fail or succeed" by showing how our freedom is constrained by capitalist property relations, capitalist requirements for reproduction, and the lack of popular democratic control over the economy.

I. "Grim trajectories" vs. success stories

Diamond's tour begins in, of all places, Montana, which has become almost a second home for his family. Montana is renowned for its natural beauty but Diamond sees the state as a microcosm of environmental problems facing the whole country: deforestation, deteriorating wa-ter quality, seasonally poor air quality, extensive toxic wastes, deteriorating soil quality, loss of biodiversity, and various effects of climate change (pp. 31-32). Most of these problems stem from the mining, logging and other industries that have scarred and polluted the landscape, and often left poverty and unemployment in their wake. Yet what Diamond finds most curious is that although Montanans take pride in the beauty of their rural mostly undeveloped state, most could benefit from legislation and government enforcement that would force the mining industry, among others, to clean up their mess. And most could benefit from the introduction of govern-mental zoning and planning to protect the quality of life they like and prevent its being trampled by unplanned chaotic development. Yet the dominant political consciousness throughout the state is strongly pro-individual-rights and anti-government regulation, an attitude born of their independent and self-sufficient pioneer history. This hostility to government regulation was itself largely responsible for letting mining and other industries get away with so much pollution in the first place. Yet today, Montanans still cling to these outmoded "core values" in the face of the need for change that could benefit them directly. "Montanans' pioneer commitment to individ-ual freedom and self-sufficiency has made them reluctant to accept their new need for govern-ment planning and for curbing individual rights"(p. 432). This theme of societal resistance to changing core values, even to the point of collective social suicide, is a theme Diamond returns to again and again.

The case of the collapse of Easter Island society was, Diamond suggests, perhaps the most purely ecological instance of collapse: From their first settlements c. AD900 the Easter Island Polynesian colonists proceeded to eat, chop and burn their way through what was initially a bountiful flora and fauna until by the seventeenth century they completely denuded the island, consumed nearly all wild food sources, and collapsed into internecine warfare and cannibalism. By comparing early garbage deposits with late prehistoric ones archeologists have been able to parse the history of this predatory mode of consumption: In the beginning, the abundance of tall trees permitted the settlers to build big seaworthy canoes to hunt dolphins and large ocean fish like tuna. The first settlers also benefited from an abundance of native land birds (6 species), at least 25 nesting seabirds, seals, inshore fish and shellfish, sea turtles and perhaps large lizards. The Easter Island human population thrived and grew as they ate their way through these extensive wild food sources and supplemented these with farming. But over time, steady deforestation soon exhausted the big trees that were the crucial not only for seaworthy canoes but for the erection of the Easter people's iconic stone statues, the famous carved stone moai. From the 1400s all of Easter's palms, it's paper mulberry (used for tapa cloth), its hardwood, fruitwood and other species used for construction, firewood and many other uses all disappeared as well. Forest clearance and human population peaked between the early 1400s and the 1600s: "The overall picture for Easter is the most extreme example of forest destruction in the Pacific, and among the most extreme in the world: the whole forest gone, and all of its tree species extinct." (p. 107). Deforestation had a devastating impact on the human population resulting in losses of raw materials, losses of wild-caught foods, and decreased crop yields: "Raw materials lost or else available only in greatly diminished amounts consisted of everything made from native plants and birds, including wood, rope, bark to manufacture bark cloth . . . Lack of large timber and rope brought an end to the transport and erection of statues, and also the construction of seagoing canoes" (p. 107). After 1650 Easter's inhabitants were reduced to burning herbs and grasses for fuel but then there was not much left to cook as most sources of wild foods were also exhausted. Without seagoing canoes, fishing was limited to small inshore species. Overharvesting wiped out all the land birds while the seabirds were reduced to remnant populations on outer islets. Shellfish declined in number and size. Palm nuts, Malay apples and all other wild fruit dropped from the diet. By the seventeenth century the only wild food source left was rats. In the end, deforestation and overexploitation of the environment resulted in starvation, a population crash, and a descent into cannibalism. By the late seventeenth century Easter Island's formerly complexly integrated society had collapsed into constant civil war and revolt and as the chiefs and their symbols of authority the moai were toppled and the remnant population of starving humans driven in hellish desperation to consume each other. When Captain Cook arrived in 1774 he found only "small, lean, timid, and miserable" survivors (p. 109) and wondered what could have befallen this obviously once fairly developed island society.

At about the same time the Polynesians were migrating across the eastern Pacific, the medieval Norse Vikings set out to trade and raid northern Europe, to venture westward into the north Atlantic and settle the Orkney, Faeroe and Shetland islands, Iceland, Greenland and Vinland (Newfoundland). Of the six Viking colonies established from the

AD 800s, Vinland, the furthest, was abandoned c. AD 1000 after only a decade because the Vikings ran into resistance from native American Indians who far outnumbered them. The settlements on the islands closest to Europe, the Orkneys, Faeroes and Shetland islands had varying ecological endowments but enjoyed a mild climate, reasonably productive soils, regular trade given their proximity to the mainland, and so survived right up to the present without much difficulty. Iceland was settled around 870 and, for some centuries the settlers pursued unsustainable economic policies: they steadily cut down what forest there was, and they overfarmed and overgrazed the fragile and erosion prone soils of this volcanic island. Eventually the settlers finally realized the error of their ways, took corrective action, killed off their ecologically destructive pigs and goats, abandoned the fragile highland pastures, and forged cooperative decisionmaking bodies and rules to protect their remaining communal pastures. But what really gave them an economic lift was the rise of the stockfish (dried cod) export industry from the late Middle Ages. Thanks to the abundance of fish (and, in the last century, the means to tap the volcanic island's geothermal power and hydropower) Iceland has become one of the world's richest countries on a per-capita basis. Diamond sees its history as "a great success story to balance the stories of societal collapse" he describes elsewhere. The tale of the Greenland Norse founding, flourishing and eventual collapse is Diamond's favorite example because of the substantial evidence that those Norse colonies of Greenland could have avoided their grim fate and forged an alternative history but for cultural, not environmental factors. For nearly 500 hundred years between A.D. 984 and the 1400s, the two Greenland colonies supported Europe's most remote outpost where up to 5,000 Scandinavians 1,500 miles from Norway built a cathedral and churches, established hundreds of farms, raised most of the livestock their brethren raised at home and also hunted caribou and seals, schooled themselves in Latin and Old Norse, followed the latest European fashions in clothing - and finally vanished. Like the Easter Islanders and so many others, the Vikings pursued unsustainable environmental policies that eventually undermined their economy: Initially, they had the good luck to find in their protected fjords a virgin landscape that had never been logged or grazed. They arrived at a time of relatively mild climate when hay production was sufficient in most years to support their livestock, when the sea lanes were free of ice, when there was European demand for their exports of walrus ivory and bear skins, and when there was no external threat from Native Americans. But from their first days they began to damage their environment and undermine their future by, among other practices, burning their meager woodlands to establish pastures, then overgrazing their fragile pastures causing soil erosion, and also cutting up much irreplaceable turf for building projects. Over time, these practices left them short of lumber, fuel and other resources, and reduced their pastures. (p. 212, 248, 252). Even in the "normal" i.e. warm times, the colonies' existence was difficult though these problems were not necessarily a fatal threat. But the climate of southern Greenland was highly variable and in the 1300s began to cool before plunging in the 1400s into the cold period we call the Little Ice Age. The cooling reduced hay production, rendering livestock raising increasingly perilous and eventually impossible. To add to their difficulties, ice-clogged shipping lanes reduced trade with Europe and trade eventually stopped altogether, partly for commercial and political reasons, but effectively cutting Greenland off access to iron, wood and other necessities. Isolated, hungry and freezing, the Greenland Norse gradually collapsed over the course of a century or so. The

northernmost settlement was abandoned first as the settlers retreated southward. The last inhabitants of the northern colony apparently starved and froze to death one spring around 1350. Over the preceding winter, those farmers had been reduced to killing their last cows, eating even the hoofs, killing and eating their precious hunting dogs and scrounging for birds and rabbits. Some Norse also probably died at the hands of the local Innuit with whom the Norse had clashed. The last inhabitants of the southern colony perished, we don't know how, around 1435 (pp. 266-67, 269).

But for Diamond, the real mystery of the Norse collapse is not why they starved and died but why they didn't adapt and survive. After all, the Norse in Iceland adapted and survived. And while the Greenland Norse perished, their nearest neighbors, the Inuit, survived and carried on more or less unchanged right into the twentieth century. Diamond says this can only be understood as a virtually self-willed collective social suicide - and the question is why? We'll return to this below.

After grinding through six cases of societal collapse in seven chapters, Diamond devotes a chapter to the stories of a three notable success stories which "also hold lessons for us, as well as hope and inspiration" (p. 277): the Pacific Island societies of the New Guinea highlanders (who have carried on for 40,000 years), the Tikopians (a small island of just 1.8 square miles but still surviving after 3000 years), and Tokugawa Japan. The unifying theme here is that, for varying reasons, these societies, which also faced environmental difficulties, many of their own doing, changed course and averted disaster. So, for example, the Tokugawa shogun, after crushing and disarming the daimyos and centralizing political military power in 1615 was able to exert an all-powerful will on the country which gave shoguns the freedom to impose reform policies from the top down. The Tokugawa peace opened the way to increased investments to boost agricultural productivity by introducing new crops, marsh reclamation, and increased production of irrigated rice. This in turn brought prosperity, a population boom, and extensive construction projects. These, mainly castle, temple and housebuilding, and construction of entire cities, consumed enormous quantities of wood. Deforestation was also driven by the use of wood for fuel, heating, and industrial uses, especially burning wood to make charcoal for smelting iron. And peasant farmers also used "green" fertilizer - leaves, bark, twigs, and fed their oxen with forest brush for fodder. By the mid seventeenth century, deforestation reached crisis proportions. "That might have led," Diamond notes, "to an Easter Island—like catastrophe. Instead, over the course of the next two centuries Japan gradually achieved a stable population and much more nearly sustainable resource consumption rates" (p. 599). Successive shoguns broke with past environmentally predatory policies and promulgated policies that restricted consumption of resources and promoted accumulating reserves. The population was also encouraged to shift from a dependence on farm-raised produce to increased reliance on seafood to relieve pressure on farming. Fishing was promoted and technologically developed. Fish meal was also developed for farm fertilizer to relieve pressure on the forests. Trade with the Ainu on Hokkaido Island was expanded to bring in smoked salmon, dried sea cucumber, abalone and other products. By the late seventeenth century government policies promoted the use of coal instead of wood for fuel, fuel efficient cooking stoves replaced the practice of heating the whole house, and timber was also conserved by promoting lighter

construction methods to replace heavily timbered houses. Measures were enacted to control erosion and by 1700 the government had developed a nationwide system of woodland management and began systematically developing plantation forestry (silviculture) which Japan invented independently of other countries. In result of this reforestation program, initiated from the top down by the Tokugawa shoguns, although Japan is today the second industrial power in the world, it remains still, and astonishingly, seventy percent forested.

II. "Free to Choose?"

In Chapter 14 Diamond turns to address the question of why some societies succeeded and others failed and collapsed. He starts by relating how when he taught the draft of this book as a course to his students at UCLA, starting with his introductory lecture on the collapse of Easter Island society, his students were puzzled by the apparently simple question: "How could a society make such an obviously disastrous decision as to cut down all the trees on which it de-pended?" The students asked the same question again and again about other cases and "won-dered whether - if there are still people left alive a hundred years from now - those people of the next century will be astonished about our blindness today as we are about the blindness of the Easter Islanders" (p. 420).

Diamond proposes a five factor schema to explain societal success or failure: environ-mental damage (deforestation, etc.), climate change (cooling, drought, etc.), opportunities or not for trade, hostile or friendly neighbors, and most critically "society's responses to its environ-mental problems" (p. 11). Some or all of these factors played a role in the collapse of this or that society. But with respect to the last factor adduced, Diamond is struck by the seeming perversity of so many societal collapses, the apparent "woodenheadedness" of individuals and societies in the face of adversity, their often tenacious hold on established "core values" and their reluctance to give these up even to the point of dooming themselves and even when salvation lay right to hand. So the Greenland Norse thought of themselves as dairy farmers, Christians, Europeans and specifically Norse and they scorned the pagan Innuit, even though the Innuit were superior colo-nizers of that harsh landscape. When it became too cold for cattle and the growing seasons began to shorten, they could have adapted to Innuit ways: they could have taken to hunting the ringed seals, fish, and whales which they must have seen the Innuit hunting. They could have adopted different, Innuit, technologies, different consumption habits and other changes in lifestyle. The medieval Greenland Norse could have adapted but would not. Instead, "[t]he Norse starved in the presence of abundant unutilized food resources." "In trying to carry on as Christian farmers, the Greenland Norse in effect were deciding that they were prepared to die as Christian farmers rather than live as Innuit." (p. 433).

Why? In Diamond's view, the most critical determinant of success or failure comes down to the conscious decisions of society's members: "Society's fate lies in its own hands and de-pends substantially on its own choices." (p. 341). Critical in this regard, Diamond argues, is the willingness of society to examine their "core values," to choose which to discard and which to hold onto. In particular "[r]eligious values tend to be especially

deeply held and hence frequent causes of disastrous behavior." (p. 432). Yet in his own historical narratives, Diamond shows that in most cases, "society" was in no position to exercise any such free choice, no position to "choose to fail or succeed." In analyzing societal responses to environmental crises, Diamond often brings in a neo-Marxist class conflict model to partially account for collapse (even though he never uses the term "class"). So he says that Easter Island society did not collapse because of human failures of judgement or lack of foresight in decisionmaking. These could have played a part. But Easter's systematic deforestation was to a very great extent driven by inter-ruling class "competition between clans and chiefs driving the erection of bigger statues requiring more wood, rope, and food" (p. 119). "Easter Island chiefs . . . acted so as to accelerate deforestation rather than to prevent it: their status depended upon their putting up bigger statues and monu-ments than their rivals. They were trapped in a competitive spiral such that any chief . . . who put up smaller statues or monuments to spare the forests would have been scorned and lost his job" (p. 431, my emphasis). For all we know, Easter Islanders understood well enough the suicidal logic of their systematic deforestation of the island. But Easter Island "society" viz. "ordinary" Easter Islanders, were in no position to change policies dictated by their ruling chiefs.

Similarly, the Mayans also faced various environmental difficulties though none that were insurmountable. "Their [the kings and nobles] attention was evidently focused on their short-term concerns of enriching themselves, waging wars, erecting monuments, competing with each other, and extracting enough food from the peasants to support all those activities. Like most leaders throughout human history, the Maya kings and nobles did not heed long-term problems, insofar as they perceived them" (p. 177). Again, given the brutal class divisions of Mayan society, I think it is safe to assume Mayan peasant society had little or no say in ruling class decisions about the future of the forest. Even Greenland Norse society, which was hardly so class divided as the Mayans still collapsed through much the same (class) conflict-driven overdriving of the environment: "[P]ower in Norse Greenland was concentrated at the top, in the hands of the chiefs and clergy. They owned most of the land (including all the best farms), owned the boats, and controlled the trade with Europe. They chose to devote much of that trade to importing goods that brought prestige to them: luxury goods for the wealthiest households, vestments and jewelry for the clergy, and bells and stained glass for the churches. Among the uses to which they allocated their few boats were the Nordrseta hunt, in order to aquire the luxury exports (such as ivory and polar bear hides) with which to pay for those imports. Chiefs had two motives for running large sheep herds that could damage the land by overgrazing: wool was Greenalnd's other principal export with which to pay for imports; and the independent farmers on overgrazed land were more likely to be forced into tenancy, and thereby to become the chiefs followers in his competition with other chiefs." (pp. 275-76). Diamond says "key decisions of Viking society were made by the chiefs, who were motivated to increase their own prestige, even in cases where that might conflict with the good of the current society as a whole and of the next generation" (p. 190, 239). "There were many inventions," Diamond suggests, "that might have improved the material conditions of the Norse, such as importing more iron and fewer luxuries, allocating more boat time to Markland journeys for obtaining iron and timber, and copying (from the Innuit) or inventing different boats and different hunting techniques."

“From our perspective today, we can’t help thinking of seemingly more important uses that the Greenlanders could have made of those boats and man-time.” But those innovations, Diamond argues, “could have threatened the power, prestige, and narrow interests of the chiefs. In the tightly controlled, interdependent society of Norse Greenland, the chiefs were in a position to prevent others from trying out such inventions” (pp. 242, 276).

In sum, on Diamond’s own telling of history, society’s fate was not “in society’s hands.” More often, it was in the hands of a small elite of kings, chiefs and priests — the ruling classes of those societies. They shut the rest of society out of decisionmaking and they systematically made the “wrong” “shortsighted” decisions that doomed their societies. Furthermore, Diamond’s narratives reveal that very often even society’s rulers were not free to choose. And that’s because these ruling classes were often “locked in a competitive spiral,” one not of their own making, but one that compelled them to make environmental decisions that were advantageous from the standpoint of their short-term immediate needs but irrational from the standpoint of society’s survival in the long run. In drawing attention to the important role of social (class) structure and elite-mass (class) conflict, Diamond has opened a fruitful approach to understanding the dynamics of eco-social collapse. Indeed, I think it’s the most important history lesson in his book. But the problem is that when he turns to our modern predicament, he completely “forgets” his own lesson.

III. Capitalism and Collapse

In last part of the book, Diamond turns to our current crisis and lists a dozen critical environmental problems that, he says, will doom our own society unless we solve them. We all know what these problems are: global warming, fossil fuel consumption, natural habitat destruction, species extinction, fresh water consumption, industrial pollution, etc. And we also all know, at least in broad terms, what we must do to solve these problems: We need to cut fossil fuel use, stop deforestation, find alternative energy sources, stop overfishing and hunting species to extinction, stop dumping toxics in the environment, and so on. So if we all know what needs to be done, and have the advantage of hindsight, why aren’t we doing it? Why aren’t we “choosing to succeed?”

The short answer is that under capitalism the choices we need to make are not up to “society. In Chapter 9, Diamond relates some success stories - mostly those of small Pacific island societies where economic and environmental decisions were indeed up to “society.” They were up to society because, unlike Easter Island or Mayan society, these were small tribal village democracies where there were no distinctions of rank or class and no elite/mass conflict. His favorite example is the highland society of New Guinea. Over thousands of years they built a mini-Switzerland of interrelated villages, terraced farms and tree plantations. The society was, and still is today, chiefless. Within each village there are just individuals and so-called “big-men” with no special privileges, who by force of personality, intelligence and experience were more influential than other individuals but still lived in a hut like everyone else’s and tilled a garden like everyone else’s. “Decisions were (and often still are today) reached by means of everybody in the

village sitting down together and talking, and talking, and talking. The big-men couldn't give orders, and they might or might not succeed in persuading others to adopt their proposals." Diamond remarks that "To outsiders today (including not just me but often New Guinea government officials themselves), that bottom-up approach to decision-making can be frustrating, because you can't get a quick answer to your request; you have to have the patience to endure talk-talk-talk for hours or days with every villager who has some opinion to offer." (pp. 278, 284-85). But it works. By getting everyone's input and approval, New Guinea societies successfully ensured consensus, rationally managed their economy, society, and environment and survived sustainably for more than 40,000 years.

But we don't live in a "bottom-up" democratic society. We live in a capitalist society in which ownership and control of the economy is largely in the hands of private corporations who pursue their own ends and don't answer to society. And that's the obvious problem. So it seems curious, even "perverse" if I may say so, that when Diamond turns to address our contemporary environmental crisis, he inexplicably forgets his own lesson and presents no comparable exploration of contradictory (class) interests and (class) conflict in modern capitalist society. This is unfortunate because Diamond's reluctance to discard his own pro-market "core values" prevents him from applying the same critical analysis to our own society that he effectively deploys to analyze ancient societies. Whatever his reason, the fact that he fails to do so makes his very useful book weakest in its concluding "What-do-we-do-now?" chapters on big business and the environment. For after stressing the need for urgent radical change to avert collapse, instead of addressing the systemic problems of capitalism that stand in the way of that needed radical change, he falls back on the standard tried-and-failed strategy of lobbying, consumer boycotts, eco labeling, green marketing, asking corporations to adopt benign "best practices" and so on - viz. the stock-in-trade strategy of the environmental lobbying industry that has proven so impotent to date against the capitalist global juggernaut of eco-destruction.

Of course this is not at all to demean reforms. Lots of problems can be and have been significantly ameliorated and even solved without overturning the economic system. But despite significant victories here and there, the big problems like global warming, deforestation, overfishing, pollution, resource exhaustion, species extinction, environmentally caused human health problems, are not getting better. They are getting worse. And they are getting worse because environmental reforms are always and everywhere subordinated to profit and growth.

Corporate "best practices" fuel global warming

Energy is a case in point. In turning to our modern dilemma, one of Diamond's favorite examples of corporate "best practices" that he holds up for emulation as the sort of "solutions" we need is Chevron's Kutubu oil field in the Kitori River watershed of New Guinea. Diamond was sent there in 1993 as a consultant to World Wildlife Fund to evaluate Chevron's practices. What Diamond - birdwatcher since he was seven - found

was that Chevron operated unlike so many other oil operations that typically trampled down and despoiled environments all over the world,

I discovered to my astonishment that [New Guinea's indigenous bird] species are much more numerous inside the Chevron area than anywhere else that I have visited on the island of New Guinea except for a few remote uninhabited areas. . . That's because there is an absolute prohibition against Chevron employees and contractors hunting any animal or fishing by any means in the project area, and because the forest is intact. The birds and animals sense that and become tame. In effect, the Kutubu oil field functions as by far the largest and most rigorously controlled national park in Papua New Guinea. (pp. 445-46).

Great. But the larger truth of this example of corporate "best practices" is an illustration of the limits of corporate reform. For the whole point of Chevron's "clean practices" demonstration in New Guinea, as Diamond himself points out, was to deflect criticism and better position itself to win new markets to drill and pump and burn more oil: "clean environmental practices help them make money and gain long-term access to new oil and gas fields" and "give it a competitive advantage in obtaining contracts." The tactic won Chevron access to Norway's North Sea fields and elsewhere (p. 449). But really, the fact that Chevron saves some birds on its protected properties in New Guinea, is nearly meaningless when measured against the global climactic devastation that Chevron and the rest of the oil-industrial complex is causing by pumping and selling ever more oil. In all probability, by opening doors to new sources in the North Sea and elsewhere, Chevron's "clean practices" in New Guinea actually helped to accelerate global oil production and the pollution that is killing the birds and us. In this connection we might note that in 1998 Chevron's "good behavior" helped it secure leases to drill in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge, should ANWR ever be opened by Congress.

The trends belie the propaganda: while the Kyoto Treaty required that industrialized countries reduce (fossil fuel combustion generated) CO2 emissions 5% below 1990 levels by 2010, emissions of EU countries are on course to climb 10% above 1990 levels by 2010. US emissions are already at least 30% above 1990 levels. And China's emissions are soaring off the charts. World oil production is at an all-time high and growing. The US, Britain and China all plead that they will be happy to do anything to reduce emissions so long as these cuts do not that "harm the economy," "undermine our American way of life" (G.W. Bush) or slow growth. So Britain's born-again environmentalist Tony Blair told Parliament in September 2004, "the world's richest nations have a responsibility to lead the way" in the fight against "our greatest environmental challenge - global warming." "There is no doubt that the time to act is now." "It is now that timely action can avert disaster. It is now that with foresight and will such action can be taken without disturbing the essence of our way of life, by adjusting behaviour, not altering it entirely."

Supersize me!

Well what is "the essence of our way of life?" In modern capitalism, the essence of the "American way of life" is not democracy or free speech (which we're finding we can do

without) but rather, the unbridled pursuit of ever-more consumption, ever higher "standards of living" as defined by ever more possessions and services — new electronic toys, bigger SUVs, larger and more luxurious homes, etc. - a trend that has reached epidemic proportions. Half a century ago, retailing analyst Victor Lebow penned the credo - the "core value" — of the then ascendant American "affluent consumer society": Lebow wrote:

Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption . . . We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.
And that's exactly what we're doing. Globally, human consumption of forests, fresh water, minerals, fish, arable land, of virtually every significant natural resource on the planet is growing "at an ever increasing rate." In March 2005 the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment compiled by 1360 scientists from 95 countries concluded that humanity is now consuming and degrading almost two-thirds of the natural resources that support life on earth. The authors call this "a stark warning" for the entire world. The wetlands, forests, savannahs, estuaries, coastal fisheries and other habitats that recycle air, water and nutrients for all living creatures are being irretrievably damaged. "In effect, one species is now a hazard to the other 10 million or so on the planet, and to itself. . . Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."
And Americans lead the way in hogging this one-time blowout sale of the world's natural resources. With just 4% of the world's population and 2% of the world's oil, we consume 25% of the world's oil and produce more than 25% of all CO2 emissions. We use 50 million tons of paper annually - consuming 850 million trees (just for paper). The average American pro-duces 864kg of municipal waste per year, nearly three times the average produced by an Italian. And on and on.

Given these trends, how can humanity survive unless we very quickly and very drastically "disturb the essence of our way of life"— by massively cutting our consumption of forests, fossil fuels, water, minerals, etc.? It is not enough just to slow down the growth of our consumption. Globally, we have to consume less - or die. We need to cut down fewer trees and give the forests a break. We need to stop reclamation and revive wetlands. We need to catch fewer fish, give the oceans, the fish, and the whales a break to regenerate. We need to drastically reduce our consumption and burning of fossil fuels. We need to halt the production of thousands of toxic chemicals, petrochemicals, pesticides, etc. that are poisoning us, stop the production of unnecessary plastics, redundant packaging, and unnecessary products. We need to stop treating the world's oceans as if they were toilets. We need to retrench the drug industry, the arms industry, the fast food industry. And if we do this, society is going to have to find new employment for redundant workers, among other concerns. Further, if we are to survive we will also have to restructure production and consumption dramatically - to close down some industries, expand others, cut waste, and conserve resources instead of squandering them. This means that we are most definitely going to have to challenge and re-conceive our "way of life" which is bound up with endless consumption of goods and services. We

will have to find life's meaning in other ways and to ask entirely new questions: Do city dwellers need private property in cars? Couldn't we share them - and many such consumer durables? Do we need industries producing an endless stream of new, and nearly all unneeded gizmos that we soon tire of, simply to seduce us into spending to maximize profits? Do we need dozens and hundreds of duplicate manufacturers all churning out virtually identical cars or TVs? Do we need designed-in obsolescence or annual model changes with all the waste that entails? Do we really need everything to be "consumed, burned, worn out replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate?" In short, if we want to survive, we are going to have to slow down the global economy, reduce production overall, make less stuff, and re-engineer manufacturing to produce products to be durable and last, make what we make differently, with different goals - for social need, not for profit. Unless we make such drastic changes, we are indeed heading for collapse.

A. Systemic barriers to limiting growth

But the problem is, how can we slow down the economy under capitalism? For the problem, to start with, is that the logic of insatiable growth is built into the nature of the system, built into the requirements of capitalist reproduction. For under capitalism, everyone finds it in his/her interest to maximize growth: Investor owned corporations have to produce for market, to com-pete against other corporations producing for the same market. So they have no choice but to constantly seek ways to drive down costs, to innovate, to expand their markets, to find or invent new markets. They are obliged, in the capitalist maxim, to"grow or die" - increase profits or see their stock values fall as investors sell off their stock for higher returns elsewhere. Just look at GM: unable to grow in a glutted market, GM's bonds have been reduced to junk status and its stock has plummeted as investors flee. Workers, facing the threat of competition and unemployment likewise can only be in favor of growth, the faster the better. Those with pension funds in-vested in the market have even more reason to support growth. Governments are similarly com-pelled to maximize growth: States need economic growth to enlarge the tax base for growing populations and demands and to provide the employment that is key to maintaining social stabil-ity. But capitalist governments don't own the economy, even if some own a sizable state sector. So globally, governments fall over themselves in competition to bribe the corporations with tax and other incentives, to drive down the wages of their own workers, to gut whatever environ-mental protection they might have and so on, in a disastrous planetary "race to the bottom." So capitalists, workers, governments — taken together, we are all - just like those Easter Islanders — "trapped in a competitive spiral" of growth without end that is beyond our control. No corporate board of directors and no government on the planet aims to slow down growth and none have tried to do so. Even the most self-styled leftist, pro-labor, pro-environmental national president in the world, Brazil's Lula Ignacio de Silva, is fiercely pushing growth and accelerating the plunder of the Amazon at the expense of the environment. And this is why the entire patchwork of government regulation, of pollution "costing," and "trading" schemes in America and Europe have been designed by business and governments as "win-win" responses to emerging environmental crises, designed to reduce emissions of particular sources but above all to keep the global economy growing.

Given these everyday built-in requirements of capitalist reproduction, can we expect the lumber and paper industries to reinvent their business plans, explain to their stockholders that, “sorry but due to the threat of global warming, we need to save the forests, cut down fewer trees, decrease output, and therefore profit?” How long would such an environmentally responsible lumber company stay in business? Or, given the immediate threat of fossil fuel combustion driven global warming, what the world needs now is not just cleaner cars but fewer cars. Surely Ford or Toyota can make smaller and even more fuel efficient hybrid cars. But can we really expect Ford or Toyota to strive to produce and sell fewer cars? They’re in business to make and sell as many cars as possible. So to ask the question is to answer it.

B. Systemic barriers to restructuring

Secondly, maintaining a habitable planet will also require massive global industrial restructuring to redirect investment from some industries like fossil fuels and into others, especially into renewable energy sources. Yet again it is all but impossible to imagine how such large scale phase-outs and investment reallocations could be made when these sectors of the economy are in the hands of privately owned corporations. Diamond argues that the costs of environmental cleanup ought to be socialized, passed onto consumers (pp. 484-85). Fair enough. But the scope of the problem we face is far beyond the capacity of any single corporation or even whole industries. We don’t have a national, much less global “Energy Company” that could make the decision to phase out investments in fossil fuels and aggressively increase investments in renewable energies, and socialize those huge but necessary costs over the whole society. What we have instead are many individual privately owned energy corporations, responsible to their shareholders, with sunk capital in existing technology they can’t afford to just scrap, with human capital in trained staff with expertise in fossil fuels, with a global infrastructure dedicated to the distribution of fossil fuels, and so on. So Ford Motor’s president planted a lawn on the roof of his new truck assembly plant; but what they’re building inside that plant - gas hog SUVs (the bigger the better) — are Ford’s biggest profit maker. So British Petroleum has set up a boutique solar power outfit, painted all its service stations up with big sunflowers and re-christened itself “Beyond Petroleum” for benefit of its ads in National Geographic. But nearly all of its sunk capital is in oil production. Petrochemicals still constitute 99% of BPs business and output and sales of these products grow every year. Can we really expect BP to just junk all this and phase out all its investments in fossil fuels? How could BP afford to do this without massive state subsidies? How could it do so while maintaining its competitive position against Exxon/Mobil or Shell? How could any individual corporation, no matter how large, sacrifice all that and stay in business? What would their stockholders say to such a proposal? Would TIAA-CREF hold onto that stock just because many of its members are enlightened, environmentally concerned professors? What would the workers say? And yet if we do not drastically reduce fossil fuel consumption and rapidly shift investment into alternative energy sources, then CO2 levels will continue to climb at present rates, if not faster, in which case they will likely reach 500 parts per million, nearly double their pre-industrial level, by 2050 or so forcing average global temperatures up by somewhere between 4.9 to 7.7 degrees at which point the global melting will accelerate and rising sea

levels will begin to inundate New York, Miami, London, Shanghai and the rest of the coastal cities of the world where most of the world's population lives. In the 18th century world of Adam Smith, individual producers - farmers, sheep husbandmen, weavers, artisans and small industrialists — producing and trading with one another could not really have much negative impact on the natural world. They didn't have the scale of production and technological capacity to do much harm. But today, when a single self-interested producer like Pacific Lumber has the technical capacity to wipe out the last remaining stands of 4,000 year old redwood forests in a few weeks, when self-interested fleets of giant satellite-guided industrial fishing trawlers strip-mine the world's oceans till fish specie after specie is driven to the brink of extinction, when a few self-interested chemical giants pump and dump so many billions of tons of toxic chemicals into the world's waters that every major fresh water source on the planet is at risk, and even human mothers' breast milk in many countries would if packaged for sale have to be labeled as hazardous waste, when a few self-interested auto-petroleum giants have the collective power to melt the polar ice-caps and dramatically alter the climate of the planet — it's time to check your theory.

The problem is the inherent logic of the system: Each corporation, acting rationally from the standpoint of its owners and employees, seeking to maximize their own self-interest, makes individually rational capitalist decisions. But the result is that in the aggregate, these individually rational decisions are massively irrational, indeed ultimately catastrophic and they are driving us down the road to collective social suicide.

IV. Plan or die: we're all in this together

If capitalism can't be reformed to subordinate profit to human survival, what alternative is there but to move to some sort of nationally and globally planned economy? Problems like climate change require the "visible hand" of direct planning. We need a globally enforced freeze on CO2 and other emissions, enforced reductions in energy usage, an enforced halt to forest destruction, enforced limits on auto production, chemical production, etc. Problems like climate change do not end at the factory smokestack or national borders so they cannot be solved by individual corporations or by individual nations. These problems are by their nature interconnected and international and require concerted, united international action - in a word, international economic planning, international governance by a global citizenry. If a habitable climate is to be preserved, global humanity will need to create institutions that can impose the sorts or required restraints - regardless of considerations of profit. Call it socialism, economic democracy or whatever. But we need to be having a national conversation, indeed a global "bottom-up" conversation about rationing resources, about limiting production and consumption, about what gets produced and what not produced, and about who gets to consume what and how much, about rationing and about rationing by democracy and not by the market. As the U.S. approached the November 2004 elections, some critics argued that "the whole world ought to vote on George Bush" since what he does has so much impact on the whole world. That's even more true with respect to the economy and the environment. We need a national and planetary vote on whether the lumber companies can mow down the forests, on whether the fishing industry can fish the seas to extinction,

on whether the auto-oil industrial complex can burn the world's fossil fuel until the icecaps melt, among other pressing issues. We in the advanced countries need to be talking about imposing limits on individual consumption, about "how much is enough" given how much we already over-consume. People in rapidly developing countries like China need to be asking themselves whether it's such a great idea to emulate American consumerism by, among other things, scrapping bicycles and adopting automobiles as mass transit. "Getting rich is glorious" but it won't be much use when Shanghai is under water. So instead of striving after mindless consumerism, the Chinese would do well to avoid going through all the stages of stupidity that we in the advanced capitalist countries have gone through. And as for the underdeveloped countries, we all need to be thinking of ways to help those peoples develop their economies in such a way that present generations can achieve a life of sufficient material satisfaction without undermining the future for their children. Such profound transformations in the organization of production, distribution, and conservation of resources cannot be realized in an anarchic unplanned market economy, they can only be realized in a democratically planned, or at least mostly planned economy.

I can already hear the objections about the perils of central planning, "state" this and "bureaucratic" that, and the threat to our freedom — especially the freedom to exploit, privatize and profit, and to insatiably consume. The global community is going to have to sit down and talk and struggle collectively and vote on these issues and every other decision important to our collective survival. It would be far beyond the scope of this article to attempt to sketch out what a model of national and global democratic economic planning might look like. But there are plenty of pre-figurative examples in the spontaneous "from below" anti-privatization, anti-globalization democratic struggles that have burst out around the world from Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil to South Africa, India and beyond, and in the huge meetings of the World Social Forum which try to confront just such issues though of course, unlike the (un-elected) WTO, the World Social Forum lacks any power whatsoever to enforce any policies. The unifying slogan of these movements — "another world is possible" — is still fairly inchoate but the instinctive drive of these struggles - toward democratization from below — is unmistakable, and hopeful. Such a "bottom-up environmental management" (to borrow Diamond's phrase) will take time, produce frustration and will be "inefficient" by some measures. But given that, like the Viking, Mayan, and Easter Island chiefs of old, our modern corporate chiefs just can't help themselves, have no choice but to systematically make wrong, irrational and ultimately, given the technology they command, suicidal decisions about the economy and the environment, what other choice do we have? If capitalist market economists have a better plan to save the humans, where is it?

http://www.selvesandothers.org/article12682.html