Why Civilizations Collapse: The Cruciality of Social Solidarity and the Dangers of Its Absence

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Abstract:

This essay examines the complexities of civilizational collapse, proposing that it is not a singular event but a prolonged process driven by internal conflicts and external threats. It begins by defining the concept of collapse and uses historian Jared Diamond's perspective to analyze how internal strife, such as loss of cultural identity, conflicting ideologies, and political division, can initiate the decline of a civilization due to a fragmentation of social solidarity. The essay then uses historical examples of the Islamic and Roman Empires to illustrate the importance of social solidarity for the survival of civilizations. It also discusses the internal challenges faced by modern civilization, including issues brought about by globalization, political polarization, East-West conflicts, global supply chain shortages, and how these factors can erode solidarity, posing a risk of collapse to the contemporary "world civilization." The essay concludes by highlighting that internal conflicts and the absence of social solidarity are the primary causes of civilizational collapse, a theory that remains relevant for understanding the challenges faced by the global civilization today.

Keywords: Civilizational collapse, social solidarity, internal conflicts, Islamic Empire, Roman Empire, globalization, political polarization, East-West conflicts, supply chain shortages, challenges of modern civilization.

Introduction

If taken as its common definition, a collapse means a singular, sudden, and complete destruction of a once meaningful structure. Many assume that the collapse of entire civilizations happen in one setting and that everything about said collapse can be traced back to a certain moment in time. It is true that the most dramatic incidents in history may be misunderstood as singular marks of collapse, yet a collapse is not just the tipping point shortly before the end of a civilization. The life cycle of civilizations is more analogous to that of a person, following the succession of birth, maturity, and death. As historian Jared Diamond (2006) states, from a historical perspective, the stage of collapse is a drastic decrease in population size or political, economic, and social complexity for an extended time. Accordingly, the collapse of civilizations is not a swift but a long-term process that begins with internal conflicts such as loss of cultural identity, conflicting values and ideologies, and political division, then accelerated by external threats, including environmental problems, rivaling civilizations, and collapse of trading partners

(Servigne, 2020). In other words, internal conflicts are the primary leads to the collapse of a civilization. Moreover, the concept of "social solidarity" is crucial for historians to understand the importance of mutual support and cohesiveness for society to avoid the aforementioned fate.

1. Social Solidarity and The Collapse of Civilizations

In his book *The Muqaddimah*, published in 1377, Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun conceptualized the word "asabiyyah", or "social solidarity" (Ibn Khaldūn, et al., 1958). According to the scholar, the rise and fall of a civilization is determined by its social solidarity, i.e., internal cohesiveness such as cultural and political identification, which is critical for the formation and continuation of a civilization. As gregarious animals, humans must fulfill their psychological need of belonging by affiliating with a social group. A cohesive bond among members of a community is then created by the conventions and values they share. Hence, people with a sense of belonging are motivated to spontaneously care for the welfare of their group and hold themselves accountable for the wellbeing of the collective. An

instinctive civic duty and willingness to collaborate for the same cause are made possible in such a solidary society, one that solves external threats in unity to become powerful and lasting.

The cruciality of social solidarity can only be illustrated through situations in which it is lost. The Islamic Empire is a prominent example. In the initial centuries of the civilization, the Islamic Golden Age, it was one of the most powerful civilizations on the globe in terms of territory and level of impact culturally and intellectually. Yet, by the 11th century, the Islamic world underwent a decline from its prominent position towards a devastating destruction in 1258, when the capital city of Baghdad was sacked by Mongol forces. According to scholar Umar Chapra (2008), the fall of the Islamic Empire is inseparable from its inner "moral decadence" and intellectual stagnation, which were marked by the closure of Iijtihad, the freedom to interpret Islamic law. The Empire's change to intellectual conservancy significantly disturbed the academic reverence that was the source of its cultural hegemony, hindering innovation and weakening governance, resulting in a divided society (Ashimi, 2016). Internal conflicts within society eroded the capacity of the Islamic Empire to fend off invasions during a time of war, resulting in military defeats and the invasion of the capital. According to Ibn Khaldun's theory, the decline of the Islamic Empire was fundamentally due to a lack of social solidarity, which then dwindled mutual support among its people. Thus, an absence of solidarity is the originator of internal problems that are often pivotal determinants in the collapse of a civilization.

Examples of society losing solidarity due to internal conflicts, ultimately leading to its decline and collapse, also exist in other civilizations. When analyzing the history of the Roman Empire, French philosopher Charles Montesquieu (1965) discusses "civic virtue", a concept very similar to social solidarity. Civic virtue is a set of responsibilities predominantly based on societal engagement, as Roman citizens were called upon to take active parts in the political life of their republic. This engagement fostered a deep sense of civic pride among the populace, who recognized their roles in actively shaping their nation. Voluntary commitment to the collective governance fueled Rome's ascent to become one of the largest empires in history. Social solidarity and the resulting willingness of its citizens to contribute to the welfare of the state was instrumental in establishing the Roman Empire's dominion.

Furthermore, according to Montesquieu, the Roman Empire's wealth and military might, often considered to be the very sources of power for it to rise to its height, actually weakened the civic virtue of the Roman people, leading to the eventual death of the Empire. By its expansionist policies, the Roman Empire absorbed and preserved the cultures of its conquered regions. Its vast territory and the diverse backgrounds of its people made cultural cohesion extremely difficult: Though its people were Roman in name, they diverged from a common identity. Ineffective leadership further exacerbated the Empire's internal weakness, as it underwent tumultuous political conflicts in the second and third centuries. Frequent changes in leadership due to assassinations and usurpations of emperors left the populace insecure and distrustful towards the Senate (Lind, 1972). The prevalence of civil wars further divided soldiers and citizens, leading to disillusionment and a weakened sense of unity. Aside from solidarity, Roman civic pride waned because of the luxurious lifestyles and widespread corruption of the Senate. Their incompetence and a "loss of virtue" further weakened the solidarity and the greatness of the state. Civic virtue reinforces loyalty and strength to a civilization; with its loss, naturally, solidarity within society is lost as well, as it lead to the decline and the eventual demise of the Roman Empire. To conclude, the wealth and military power of Rome was saddled by its discordant culture and government, creating political instabilities that dwindled the people's solidarity. The collapse of a civilization stems from its internal conflicts: It is the initial impetus of a civilization's decline, triggering the loss of consensus and mutual support among its people, the weakening of military might, eventually leading to disintegration and downfall.

To conclude, the wealth and military power of Rome contrasted its discordant culture and government, creating political instabilities that dwindled the people's solidarity. Therefore, the collapse of a civilization stems from its internal conflicts: It is the initial impetus of a civilization's decline, triggering the loss of consensus and mutual support among its people, the weakening of military might, eventually leading to disintegration and downfall.

2. Our Civilization and The Danger of Collapse

History has taught us how the trigger of a collapse often stems from internal challenges, a commonality that is relevant in the world today. The modern civilization faces various internal challenges and instabilities; though globalization reduces the possibility of a collapse because of the interdependence of nations, it also indicates that internal problems become shared, such as the issue of failing social solidarity.

2.1 A World Civilization

External dangers have contributed to collapses because of the isolation of historical civilizations. In the past, while

friendly diplomatic relations existed between trading partners, this was often only possible in the existence of advantageous geography and systematic trade routes. Interacting with the entire globe was once unthinkable. Yet, at some point in modern history, globalization has merged discrete civilizations into one "world" civilization. This form of human organization is different from any that existed in the past.

A recurring historical trend is that technological development drives globalization, creating interconnections across national boundaries. Globalization has existed since at least 100 B.C.E. with the Silk Road, a network connecting and conducting exchanges between Asia and Europe. As technology developed, in modern history, imperialism furthered international connections through colonial rule, funding an increase in global trade and affecting more regions of the globe. This technological progress marks a significant difference between modern civilization and past civilizations. Either through a system of reciprocation or through power, civilizations have steadily increased the extent of globalization. Contemporarily, the concept of "civilization" itself has expanded from being tied to specific nations or cultures, to now encompassing the entirety of the global human community.

If the two major categories of external issues to a civilization are environmental disasters and rivaling civilizations (Servigne, 2020), modern world civilization has been successful in avoiding both. Today's technology can predict and prevent environmental disasters. As knowledge progresses, future geo-engineering may even allow humans to directly manipulate the environment. Globalization has connected the world across social, economic, and political dimensions in a way that have led countries into cooperation, their ways of life comparable. Thus, international conflicts, or what would have been considered to be external rivalries, have now become conflicts within the world civilization. With risks of heavy repercussions in multiple societal aspects and with world organizations such as the United Nations as mediators, the world can largely avoid risks of collapse from competition with other civilizations. Yet despite the elimination of external risks, internal problems still exist, weakening social solidarity in our world civilization.

2.2 The Dangers Our Civilization Faces

Although the world civilization can be referred to as a whole, because of the diversity and complexity it holds, it has become more prone to internal conflict and division. Since internal causes are the fundamental reasons for the decline and collapse of a civilization, despite the current globe being the most interconnected that humanity has ever been, it is in an unprecedented danger of collapse

originating solely from its internal conflicts.

Due to globalization, regional disputes will be metastasized into global issues. Technological advancements have increased the devastation of modern conflicts. For instance, The Cuban Missile Crisis exemplified the terrifying potential of modern weapons for destruction, nearly resulting in nuclear world war. Such crises demonstrate how international tensions now threaten human civilization as a whole.

Political polarization is breaking the solidarity of Western countries. In Western democracies, a growing divide is occurring between left and right-leaning factions in society, where positions on key issues become increasingly entrenched and extreme. As people's faith in traditional political institutions decline, it becomes difficult to maintain a sense of common purpose and shared values within the population, deteriorating social cohesion.

Political conflicts between the East and West have led to populism, leading to de- globalization. The deterioration of relations between major powers like the US/Europe and Russia/China has led to heightened geopolitical rivalries and conflicts on a range of issues, from the war in Ukraine to de-globalizing trade policies. The distrust and antagonism fueled by these East-West conflicts has empowered populism, steering the world away from international cooperation. As countries become more protectionist, significant economic disruptions and barriers occur in supply chain and trade, making it more difficult for governments to address pressing issues like inflation and cost-of-living crises, furthering failing social solidarity.

Global supply chains are facing the worst shortages in 50 years due to geopolitical tensions as more than 5% of global industrial production in the following years may be deducted (Iglinski- Rochester, 2022). More importantly, the economic headwinds and political uncertainty created by these dynamics have forced the European Union to delay or potentially even cancel its ambitious goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. This threatens to undermine the global climate change mitigation efforts and is thus putting the future of our civilization in danger.

In conclusion, when analyzing the collapses of the Islamic Empire and the Roman Empire, it is manifested that internal conflicts and the loss of social solidarity is the main cause of the collapse of civilizations, as it leads to corruption, loss of mutual support, and distrust of the government. This theory is applicable in the present world. The modern world has formed an unprecedented, globalized 'world civilization', with internal political conflicts that lead to alienation. If intensified, these issues may spark devastating de-globalization or a third World War. Hence, the contemporary collective world civilization is still in the danger of division, disintegration, and collapse.

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