

That Old Devil Called Collapse

Written by Guy D. Middleton

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GUY D. MIDDLETON, FEB 6 2013

'Mild drought killed Maya civilization', 'Climate killed Harappan civilization', 'Did climate change kill the Mayans?' If you watch for news about collapse, these are some of the headlines you might have seen published in 2012 (News24 2012; The Times of India 2012; Kluger 2012). The collapse of past societies is a newsworthy subject – dramatic, exciting, tragic, spectacular, with a human angle, and with a special resonance for us in these days of climatic uncertainty and widespread human-caused environmental damage. Yet they are typical of the misrepresentation of collapse as a phenomenon studied and written about by archaeologists – those who study the past societies in question – and they feed a climate of misunderstanding about what collapse is and how historical change happens (Middleton 2012).

Take the Maya collapse. A recent review article by Mayanist Jim Aimers begins by quoting an earlier specialist E. Wyllys Andrews, who in 1973 stated: 'Much has been published in recent years about the collapse of Maya civilization and its causes... in my belief no such thing happened' (Aimers 2007, 329). In the next decade, archaeologist Jeremy Sabloff (1986, 115) also pointed out: 'There was no overall *collapse* at this time [AD 800-1200] (as has often been argued in the past), but a major demographic, economic, and political *realignment* among the various peer polities of the Late Classic period'. Traci Ardren (2005), an archaeologist working in northern Yucatan, wonders why 'the terms 'collapse' and 'fall' are still used today to describe complex processes of cultural evolution or transformation'. But these views tend to be less reported.

It is easy to forget that when the Spanish reached their New World, they encountered living breathing societies doing perfectly well without the presence of colonial Europeans. When they made it to Yucatan, the Spanish encountered 'civilized' Maya people engaged in trade and who had impressive and populous towns and cities, and stone buildings. Bernal Diaz, member of a 1517 expedition that set out from Cuba, recorded their first sight of land: 'From the ships we could see a large town... and as we had never seen one as large in Cuba or Hispaniola we named it the Great Cairo' (Diaz 1963, 17). Another town, Cempoala, was named for Seville – Diaz wrote 'as we came among the houses, we saw how large a town it was... and were full of admiration. It was so green with vegetation that it looked like a garden; and its streets were so full of men and women who had come out to see us that we gave thanks to God for the discovery of such a country' (Diaz 1963, 107-108).

Reading Diaz, we can gain a sense of his awe and curiosity at a world new to him, yet that was clearly well established, and of the richness and sophistication of the Maya society he saw. Maya civilization and people were far from 'killed off' five or six centuries beforehand just as the fall of Rome or the Black Death did not put an end to Europe. Nowadays, there are perhaps some seven million diverse 'Maya' people living in the lands where their ancestors also lived (Castañeda 2004).

What Causes Misunderstanding about Collapse?

Two major causes of misunderstandings about past collapse are firstly what it is that is doing the collapsing, and second, just what is meant by the word 'collapse'. As Arthur Demarest (2001, 105) notes:

Recent discussions of the collapse of civilizations have demonstrated that terminological ambiguity creates much of the controversy regarding comparative issues, including differences in the interpretation of specific cultural historical

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episodes. The meanings of terms such as 'collapse' and 'decline' are far from obvious. Furthermore, ambiguity about what precisely is 'collapsing' (e.g. 'civilization,' 'state,' 'kingdoms,' 'tradition,' 'society') generates more disagreement than do problems of historical or archaeological interpretation.

For some, like Tainter (1988), collapse is a political process of simplification that can happen to any complex society. For others influenced by biology and ecology, such as Jared Diamond (2005), it is primarily a demographic change involving drastic population loss in a particular area.

These are two very different processes, although at times they may resemble each other, for political and economic change can clearly have demographic consequences – the loss of Rome's pre-eminence in the fourth and fifth centuries AD led to population decline there, not the other way around. Changes in political and economic fortune cause real demographic shifts – we can see this clearly with the rise of modern urbanism and the fate of Detroit in recent years (ABC News 2011). Populations can fluctuate without any political or social collapse – the Black Death, whatever changes it did bring, did not bring about state collapses. However, in the European colonizations of the Americas, Australasia, and the Pacific, indigenous states and populations were dealt knock out blows from disease and trauma – in the context of invasion and colonisation (Denevan 1992).

Many archaeologists see collapse as an *apparently* sudden and profound change in material culture, a discontinuity, which can indicate political, social, and economic changes that can be driven by many causes – internal as well as external. 'Sudden' is something of a weasel word, for it can mean a period of decades, or even longer, depending on the case and writer. It does not mean that everyone suddenly disappeared, but that economies, identities, ideologies, and lifestyles may have changed. Collapse is increasingly being seen by archaeologists as part of a process of reorganization where it can be a part of the formation of new units (Schwartz and Nichols 2006). As Eisenstadt (1988, 242) explained:

Ancient states and societies do not collapse at all, if by collapse is meant the complete end of these political systems and their accompanying civilizational frameworks. Thus the investigation of collapse... really entails identifying the various kinds of social reorganization in these types of societies and so viewing collapse as part of the continuous process of boundary reconstruction.

Definitions are important. States collapse, but civilizations and cultures are not 'collapsible' – though aspects of them, especially material culture and behaviours connected with elites, may disappear with states; they transform and change constantly. Such changes may happen without collapse too. But there is no simple equation of population loss with many definitions and descriptions of historical collapse – in most cases there was no demographic 'apocalypse', even though there may well have been changes in settlement patterns, conflict and crisis, trauma and dislocation – along with opportunism and decision-making by individuals and groups.

Stories and Social Memory

One reason for the popularity of apocalyptic collapse is that they build on a foundation of stories in our inherited traditions, classical and biblical, which contribute to a shared vision of collapse in popular society. The story of Atlantis, for example, is more popular now, and more widely known than it ever was in ancient Greece. In that story, an all-powerful state, Atlantis, was destroyed by natural disaster:

there were earthquakes and floods of extraordinary violence, and in a single dreadful day and night all your fighting men were swallowed up by the earth, and the island of Atlantis was similarly swallowed up by the sea and vanished (Plato 1977, 38).

Modern scholars and others have long tried to locate this disaster as a real event, or a memory of something historic, providing real locations and sometimes a plausible narrative, but the point of the story, which is a Platonic political myth *not* a traditional Greek myth, is that pride and arrogance – *hubris* – leads to disaster. The Atlanteans had tried to conquer the world; thus they lost a war to the still virtuous and brave Athenians, and were then divinely punished. We could add to this vivid apocalypse narrative the stories of the Biblical flood, or Sodom and Gomorrah – other tales in

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which apocalyptic destruction is wrought, but where a moral message is the main point.

Whether we believe in these tales in any way or not, we inherit their powerful imagery and multiple meanings. The spectacle of apocalyptic destruction itself, and its cause in some human behavioural or moral failing continues in the modern parable of ecological collapse.

Mediatized Collapse

Our media age provides an ideal setting for the transfer of stories and images, and apocalyptic views of collapse are routinely found in the mass media. Partly this is for entertainment – we can enjoy feature films such as *2012*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Armageddon*, or *Contagion* for enjoyment of the spectacle at the same time as they raise the idea that we might really suffer some dreadful global event. But documentary series also often present historical change as apocalyptic – the BBC's *Ancient Apocalypse* shows, the History Channel's *Who Killed the Maya?* or *Secrets of the Aegean Apocalypse*. While presenting real archaeological and historical research, this plays second fiddle to the stories of disaster. And so fragments of history become mythologised in a different context with stories of doom staking out a position, which is neither entirely 'fiction' but not necessarily 'fact' either.

There is also a problem in the transfer of scientific and historical data via the press media. I began this article by quoting headlines that can be encountered when scientific research is announced for general consumption. Each of the headlines quoted above are based on peer-reviewed research published in scientific journals (Giosan *et al.* 2012; Kennet *et al.* 2012; Medina-Elizalde and Rohling 2012). None of the papers are typical archaeological papers – archaeological work tends not attract the kind of headlines that 'hard' scientific research does but stories from interdisciplinary journals such as *Science* are often reported on.

Such journals select work which is both novel and interdisciplinary, with wide appeal. The identification and solution of a problem is key both to scientific research and to its publication – this is the narrative pattern of scientific research writing. This 'problem frame' is entirely suited to news publication and reportage, which commodifies news and infotainment and presents it in bite size 'quick fix' chunks (Altheide 1997). Thus again, the problem of collapse and what was collapsing can be largely lost as it is passed on, even when the original article made some effort to put the problem and solution in context.

Discovery and Collapse

A final reason for the prevalence of apocalyptic collapse scenarios is the creation of 'mysterious' problems in history itself. The archaeology that prevails now as a western academic discourse was born out of antiquarianism and the rise of scientific, evidence-based thought of the nineteenth century. Its birth coincided with the Europeans' discovery, exploration, and exploitation of the rest of the world. While others may have been getting along just fine, their 'discovery' by Europeans forced the discoverers to place them, their cultures, and the spaces in which they existed into a scheme of the world that made sense to them at the time. These discourses maintain a powerful influence over thought patterns even now, even as post-colonialism and post-modernism chip away at them.

Although Europeans and Maya had been interacting since the sixteenth century, and the last Maya kingdom was conquered in 1697 (almost fifty years after the English Civil War ended and almost a decade after the Glorious Revolution) the nineteenth century 'discovery' of the Maya by European and American explorers promoted a particular view of indigenous heritage. John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood (1969, 104) writing high adventure for a popular audience in 1841 thus state of Copan:

We sat down on the very edge of the wall and strove in vain to penetrate the mystery by which we were surrounded. Who were the people that built this city? In the ruined cities of Egypt, even in the long-lost Petra, the stranger knows the story of the people whose vestiges are around him. America, say historians, was peopled by savages; but savages never carved these stones. We asked the Indians who made them, and their dull answer was 'Quien sabe?' 'who knows?'

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They stressed the disjunct between local people and the great monuments built by people in an ancient past. In the same way, other Europeans dissociated the monuments of Great Zimbabwe or Easter Island from local people and their ancestors, creating a mystery to be solved by migration or the collapse and disappearance of some former high civilization (Härke 2006). In some cases, the presence of scripts that could no longer be read added to this 'mystery'. But what is less well remembered is that it was Europeans who infected populations with disease and disrupted local literacy practices. Maya books were burned and on Easter Island, the Rapa Nui population fell prey to slave raiding and Christianity, erasing much indigenous knowledge and culture, including of the indigenous rongorongo script.

The Return of Human Agency

Writing about the Maya collapse, David Houston and Takeshi Inomata stated recently (2009, 295) that:

There is an emerging recognition that, even for a period of such drastic social change, human experience and behavior should be our target. Social changes are ultimately the expression of human action and inaction. In this respect, even the theory emphasizing climatic changes is insufficient: instead of assuming a mechanistic relation between droughts and social collapse, scholars should analyze the vulnerability of society to climatic change and how the Maya dealt with, or failed to deal with, such natural disasters. Further, it may be naïve to believe that societies are inherently stable until upset by drastic events. The Maya, like any other society, struggled constantly with changing natural and social environments.

Archaeologists debate the causes of collapse, but most agree that it is a complex process, one that is unpredictable and in which many factors are implicated, playing off one another in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Take the collapse of Mycenaean palace societies in the Late Bronze Age, c. 1200 BC. Although a recent popular science magazine (Marshall 2012, based on Drake 2012) suggests that the Mycenaean collapse can be added to the list of those caused by climate change, one Aegean archaeologist's view (Maran 2009) is that constant impressive building programmes and warfare disrupted the agricultural economy of the palace states. Warfare increased, killing more people, destroying more villages, and causing further economic and social disruptions. Collapse of the palace states was a destructive spiral caused by human choices – the LBA states became failed states, perhaps ending with the rise of small-scale warlords.

Some archaeologists also propose that the sites of Mycenae and Tiryns suffered multiple and repeated earthquake destructions (French and Stockhammer 2009). But these happened both before and after collapse as well – so earthquakes in themselves also did not cause the c. 1200 BC collapse. They may well have added to the circumstances of collapse; we know that state-owned slaves in Sparta took advantage of an earthquake to revolt in 464 BC, threatening the Spartan state. What we see is that human factors can sometimes cause the same situations – famines and food shortages, often attributed to natural disaster. Droughts and earthquakes, which must have been regular occurrences, could easily have exacerbated conditions of difficulty for some and created opportunities for others (see also Dickinson 2010; Middleton 2010).

In this sense, we also have to consider the role of chance in the survival or collapse of states and regimes, as Kaufman (1988, 234) explains:

Chance obviously played a large part in the success or failure of states... A combination of favorable circumstances could catapult one system to the summit and keep it there for a long time; a sudden misfortune might drag a system from its day in the sun after a short interval. That is not to say that the people in positions of responsibility in the overarching polities had *no* influence on their own fate; their actions could certainly exacerbate difficulties or take advantage of opportunities.

What those who advance climate change arguments rarely seem to explain is why and how people and civilization *survived* – in Greece it was only the palace states and some of the trappings of their rulers and elites (like writing) that disappeared, and Greece had never been completely covered by such states in the first place. Although there were changes, Mycenaean people and culture survived intact. Tiryns and other regions even thrived for a time in the twelfth century, though the postpalatial period is often written off as a less impressive beginning of a dark age.

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Postpalatial Mycenaean civilization transformed over the next century and a half smoothly into the succeeding Protogeometric culture. Climate change does not explain why the palaces were destroyed and not rebuilt when there were people around to do so.

Conclusions

Time and lack of evidence can play tricks, and the less we know about a past society or collapse, the more fitting an apocalyptic collapse or an environment-based argument can seem. But within the last century the world has changed profoundly too. People still alive now were born when the British empire was a world power at its greatest extent in 1920, yet though that empire no longer exists, there has been no apocalypse or climate change that brought about its collapse. The near future could even bring further dissolution to the United Kingdom – depending on the result of the Scottish referendum on independence. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires have been dissolved and new states and identities created in their stead. Communism has risen and fallen in Russia and Eastern Europe, fascism in the west. Although the world economy fluctuates, the young United States is still powerful, and China, an old power, is rising as a modern global one. 2012 was marked by the Arab Spring uprisings – a timely reminder that people can and do drive historical change in their own communities.

The focus on apocalyptic and environmental collapse that we see today is almost inevitable, but I think it misleads as far as the archaeological discussions are concerned. It can also direct attention away from the agency of people in driving historical change through regular social life and interaction, which is in my view much more significant. This is of wider concern because it focuses our interest in contemporary sustainability towards largely impersonal external factors and towards the maintenance of the status quo and can prevent us from looking at other social factors that contribute to creating sustainable societies. Some of the most profound historical changes have come from changing value systems and from confronting economic, social, and political issues in the past two centuries. Far from having reached the end of history, we continue to wrestle with these matters on a daily basis, locally, nationally, and internationally.

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