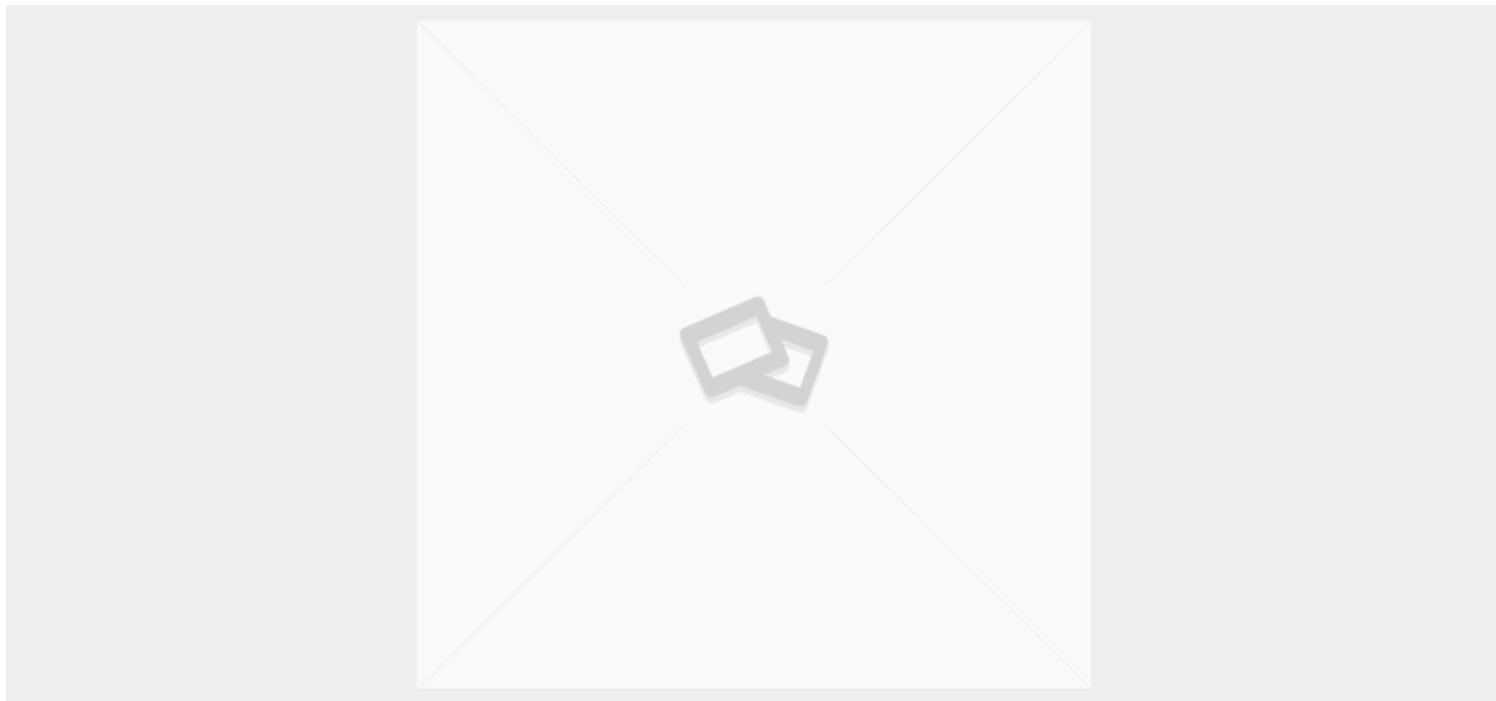


"COLLAPSE" AND HOW IT RELATES TO THINGS ARMENIAN

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By Viken L. Attarian P.Eng. MBA, Montréal

One of my personal influences is Jared Diamond. After reading his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1998), many things that were a mere suspicion became very clear, as if when a misty and blurry image suddenly comes into very sharp focus. The memory of that moment never leaves you and, even when you willingly try to, you can no longer claim that you do not know. It keeps drawing you back into its referential frames and reminds you that you cannot stray away from its conclusions.

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In fact, that book was a source of inspiration for me to deliver a lecture a few years ago, on the invitation of the Canadian Armenian Women's Association on March 8th, the International Women's Day. The topic was, "History of the status of women over the past 10,000 years, or How we got where we are today". The lecture lasted about 2 hours.

As a result, I might actually be the record holder (at least among Armenians) of covering such a long period of time in such a relatively short lecture. It would put me at about 5000 years per hour or at an "astonishing" 1.9 years per second. I had a lot of fun researching and delivering it.

In 2005, Diamond published another book called *Collapse, How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. By all indications, it is destined to become another landmark book. *Collapse* describes the stories of several historical societies that collapsed because of certain things they did or did not do. Examples of such societies, which lasted several centuries and even millennia before they destroyed themselves, include Easter Island, the Maya and the first Norse settlement of Greenland. Diamond also analyzes the reasons for such behaviour by those societies and, once again, comes up with masterful conclusions as to the causes.

In the same year of publication, Diamond gave a series of lectures about his new book. The most famous of them occurred upon the invitation of the [Long-Now Foundation](http://www.longnow.org), an institution dedicated to foster and encourage the proliferation of very long-term thinking (on the millennial scale). Give their web site a visit; you might learn a thing or two. Visit their website: <http://www.longnow.org>

Click [here](#) to view the video of Jared Diamond giving his famous lecture.

Diamond's book is ultimately about environmental degradation and how, despite the glaring evidence, societies have in the past continued (and sometimes still do so today) to destroy their surroundings and themselves in the process.

Here are some of the main reasons, Diamond concludes, that cause societies to refuse to acknowledge that they have embarked on a track of self-destruction. He is, of course, much more articulate and gives numerous examples of each case.

1. Failure to anticipate the upcoming disaster, sometimes because nothing in their past experience would suggest the resulting outcome, or because that past experience is forgotten, or because they refuse to learn from that past experience fuelled by their use of false "analogies".

2. Failure to perceive that the problem has actually arrived, sometimes because the problem is imperceptible, or because of the remoteness of the decision makers from the actual place of occurrence of the problem.

3. The slowly accruing trend of the problem that creates the concept of "creeping normalcy", in other words, because of the long-lasting trend, the incremental differences in degradation become accepted by that society until a point of no return is reached.

4. The "rational/utilitarian" behaviour of some of the members of that society, whose interest is at a conflict with the interest of the society as a whole. This argument follows the "logic" (or lack thereof) of someone who decides, for example, to overfish or overharvest, because he reasons that if he doesn't, then someone else will. As more and more members of that society behave that way, the society depletes the resources it relies on and essentially dies off. Such decline is rapidly accelerated especially if it is the governing elite that engages in such predatory practices, at the expense of the common folk.

5. "Irrational behaviour" attached to values, mainly religious ones, resulting in persistence in error. For example, by insisting on not practicing birth control by many societies today, or by the religious fervour of building monumental statues on Easter Island.

6. Dislike of the general public of those who are bearers of bad news, and their ensuing dismissing of the warnings as exaggerated. This results mostly from a short-term focus of all the levels of a society and the inability of the governing elites to focus on the longer term issues that would extend beyond a generation.

7. "Crowd psychology" or "groupthink", better known as the herd mentality, where a smaller group of people who think alike, will act in a mutually reinforcing way, and as they steer the society in the wrong direction, they are followed by the rest. This leads to a complete disappearance of critical thinking and the eventual destruction of that society.

8. Psychological denial, because of suppressed painful memories that prevent a society from taking the right decisions and basically paralyze it. The same way that such denials are used to explain individual behaviour, they would apply to societies that have suffered some kind of historical trauma or terror, therefore refusing to confront a massive threat and essentially "shutting down" their collective defense mechanism.

As you will hear in the lecture linked above, Diamond says that when he presented the case of the collapse of the Easter Island society to his students, they posed a very interesting question. Since the collapse of that society was ultimately driven by the destruction of all the trees on the island (which they needed for wood to build sleds to carry their megastatues to their places of worship, and to build canoes to go fishing in the ocean), the question that his students posed is as follows:

"What did the person who chopped down the last tree on the island say, as he was chopping it down?" They also proposed some answers as follows:

- a) "Never fear, technology will solve all our problems by finding a substitute for wood !!!".
- b) "This is my private property. This tree is mine. Private property rights are to be respected and I can do with them whatever I please. Keep the big government and the chiefs off my back !!!".
- c) "The fears of you environmentalists are exaggerated. You don't know what is going on in some other part of the island. Perhaps there are still trees out there. A ban on logging would be premature. We need more research".
- d) "Never fear ! Have faith ! God will somehow provide for us".

Of course, history tells us that after a civilization that likely lasted over a thousand years, the last tree on Easter Island was cut down in the 1680s. The islanders could no longer build the sleds to carry the giant statues of worship. Soil erosion and deforestation killed off all sources of food on the island. They could no longer build canoes to go out fishing. So they turned on each other for sources of protein. They descended into civil warfare and cannibalism. When Europeans discovered them about a century later, there were only a few hundred islanders left who had lost the ability to read and write in their uniquely developed language, and had almost reverted to stone age tools. Most of them died as a result of the diseases imported by the Europeans or were enslaved by the newcomers.

Now why is all this relevant to Armenians?

Let me count the ways.

Firstly, every single one of the reasons that these societies collapsed seems to be endemic among Armenians, both in Armenia but, also mainly, in the Diaspora.

Secondly, the Easter Island metaphor is very much applicable and in fact quite analogous with our situation as a people.

If we look at our resources that will be required to get through these difficult times, then they would be financial capital, intellectual capital and arguably the State of Armenia itself. Related resources and concepts would be the Armenian identity (for, in general, one will firstly need to identify with being Armenian in order to feel compelled to act for improving our sort), and ultimately the demographic vigor and dynamism of the Diasporan communities and its institutions.

These resources are finite and under tremendous stress.

Here is a one-to-one mapping of the above reasons for collapse to our situation:

- 1. Failure to anticipate the upcoming disaster**, well, this would be rather obvious. In the past century, we collectively failed to anticipate the Genocide, the Treaty of Lausanne, the assimilation of the Diaspora. I single these three calamities out because we are today living and literally dying as a nation because of the consequences of these three events.
- 2. Failure to perceive that the problem has actually arrived**, the real problem, after the Yeghern, has always been the gradual disappearance of the Diaspora and the increasing distance between itself and its collective memory of a homeland. Demographic and societal evolutions have statistical and mathematical rules by which they evolve. The notion of a minimal critical population mass in a community is actually a well-established construct in the social sciences. We have ignored these important intellectual advances to our own peril, and gradual assimilation has blurred the boundaries of what can or can no longer be saved. Large migrational trends away from the geographical proximity of a historical homeland have accelerated the assimilatory trends and the further dispersions of the Diasporan communities. For the first time ever, we have a new generation that has not even grown up knowing and interacting with Genocide survivors. That experience is now therefore relegated to a memory which, at best, is written in a language which is no longer read, or it is largely a memory of oral history, therefore subject to distortion. As a result, the survivability of such communities beyond a single generation is highly questionable.
- 3. The slowly accruing trend of the problem that creates the concept of "creeping normalcy"**, a glaring example of this one in our communities is the current almost "accepted gospel" that the Armenian language is not relevant for the modern conceptualization of an Armenian identity, or that at least it is not as relevant as it used to be. Parents of children attending Armenian schools complain about the "high" number of hours allotted to Armenian topics and the amount of homework given in Armenian. Organizational leaders publicly argue that the role of language in determining identity belongs to the past and that we must embrace the definition of the new Armenian for whom the learning of the Armenian language is equivalent to learning any foreign language, like Mandarin or Spanish. The fact that this position goes against not only common sense, but in fact against every single research conclusion done on the topic of language and identity for the past two hundred years does not seem to bother anyone. Furthermore, there is a conspicuous absence of any organized official or grassroots body in the Diaspora or even in Armenia to defend the Armenian language, in any of its forms (Eastern or Western) against serious encroachments and outright assault from all sides. Lack of knowledge of Armenian does not seem to be a deterrent for advancement in any Armenian institution (even in Armenia), mastery of the language does not seem to be a requirement even for journalists in Armenia, whose media is literally peppered with gross grammatical and orthographic violations. For example, as recently as a few weeks ago, one of the web sites of a major and respectable journalistic outlet (in Armenian) from Armenia had the label on

its Search Function button spelt glaringly **Ի** (Pronounced Pndrel). After I pointed out to them 3 times, over a period of three months, that this is a major error in any branch of the Armenian, the Western, the Eastern and even in the bastardized Apeghian orthography and should be **Ի**, i.e. with the trilled letter "r" (Pronounced Pndrrel = to search for). I am still to be honoured by even an acknowledgement of receipt of my emails. There is a massive international movement to protect and even to revive thousands of languages that are part of the human heritage and shape the identity of the people who speak them. In fact, this is deemed so vital to identity and heritage that the UN General Assembly declared 2008 to be the International Year of Languages and mandated the UNESCO to lead the initiatives worldwide to preserve all languages. Visit their website and you will see there calls for papers, projects, conferences, research material, funding opportunities. The Armenian contribution? How to preserve the cultural heritage of the Duduk. Important, but hardly relevant.

4. The "rational/utilitarian" behaviour of some of the members of that society, whose interest is at a conflict with the interest of the society as a whole. Now, examples of this would really be countless, but certainly, every single story of embezzlement, enticement to fraud in our community organizations would fall under this one. How about the stifling of dissent in our organizations? The hiring of incompetent teachers and administrators in our schools? How about our political parties pursuing a strictly self serving agenda? Do we need to enumerate the incidents of brotherly hate? The murders of Armenians who belonged to other factions by fellow Armenians? How about the assassination of the former Prime Minister in the Armenian Parliament? The murder of an archbishop on the altar in New York? The betrayals to the Ottomans, the Stalinists, and even the collaboration with the Nazis of our modern "heroes"? Every single one of these instances is actually an exercise in "utilitarian" behaviour by the perpetrators. The end result? Erosion of collective goodwill, institutional breakdown, decline of standards of social behaviour, disappearance of true altruism, and a growing mentality that the Diaspora is not reformable, and hence the disappearance of vitality and youth involvement is virtually guaranteed. Members of an educated, highly mobile, ambitious young generation of Armenian descent see no reason to invest of themselves in their communities.

5. "Irrational behaviour" attached to values, mainly religious ones, resulting in persistence in error. This one is certainly prevalent across the board. Ask any Armenian, in the Diaspora or in Armenia to name five top priorities for the nation, and I can guarantee you that building more churches would not be one of them. In Armenia, the issues would be centered around healthcare, jobs, decent living standards, environmental degradation, democracy, corruption, crime rate, outmigration from the villages into Yerevan, emigration from the country etc. In the Diaspora, the issues would be centered around survival of the Armenian language, the lack of youth involvement in traditional organizations, the lack of quality Armenian schools and the qualified staff for them, Genocide recognition, survival of the community as a whole, intermarriage with non-Armenians, migration demographics and integration issues among several communities of differing geographical backgrounds (e.g. Egyptian-Armenians with Iranian Armenians), etc. The solutions to

many if not all of these problems hardly ever would include the building of churches, especially in communities and places that have an overabundance of them, like Armenia. While a church has its place and role in the Armenian psyche, it cannot be the all curing panacea. No truly critical thinking would come up with such an approach. The question then is, why are enormous resources literally wasted to build more and more churches? Why can't we renovate the existing historical ones in Armenia and revive them instead? And in the Diaspora, why cannot we dedicate our resources to building museums, better schools, training our teachers, building art institutions, concert halls, research labs, university scholarship funds for all Armenians, publishing books, creating literary and artistic prizes, building clinics, old age homes? Sure, we might be doing all or some of that, but if we compare the level of investments, I suspect that over 90% of it go into churches or related religiously affiliated establishments which become the only way to channel any other community public activity, essentially lulling us to believe that there is no other way to do things. We can see that all across the Diasporan communities in the Western world. The wealthiest and most prosperous of the Diasporas which is in US, after at least a century of highly affluent existence, does not have a single Armenian Art Center or a Concert Hall. If the Italian community in Montreal can initiate and complete the DaVinci Cultural facility which is unique in the city and attracts world class performances and events, why can't Armenians have one, and they focus instead on building church number 8 in a community of 35,000 and actually see nothing wrong with this? Why is it that there are special educational consultants that work for the secular institutions built by the Jewish community such as Jewish Family Services, (not attached to any synagogue by the way), who provide expert services not only to the Jewish community but to all educational institutions in Canada, and Armenians insist on attaching any social service programs they might have, if at all, to their religious institutions?

6. Dislike of the general public of those who are bearers of bad news, and their ensuing dismissing of the warnings as exaggerated. The most persistent example of this is the rapid disappearance and quasi elimination of the Armenian intellectual in the Diaspora (see my lecture "The Vanishing Breed of the Armenian Intellectual : Canaries in a Mineshaft", at the Columbia University conference The Diaspora and its Discontents to be posted soon on this blog). The educational institutions nurturing those intellectuals are all but gone or have been radically reduced in their instructional stature and capacity (The Melkonian Educational Institution in Cyprus, Mourad Raphaelian of the Mekhitarist Order in Venice, Hovaguimian-Manouguian of the AGBU in Beirut, Djemaran of Hamazkaine in Beirut) the only exception still being Getronagan in Istanbul. Arguably the two greatest writer/intellectuals of the Diaspora and even Armenia were Shahan Shahnour in Western Armenian and Gostan Zarian in Eastern Armenian. Both of who were reviled and attacked at all levels both by individual, institutional and even state structures. Yet both produced pieces that diagnose the destiny of our people with remarkably clear foresight. The intellectuals of today, none of whom is at the level of these two, are at best ignored and at worst, still reviled publicly and privately. This behaviour, while not unique to Armenians, is particularly detrimental for us as a people, because we lack any other mechanism of checks and balances. Destroying our own

intellectual ability is literally cutting off our potential to renew ourselves and destroying our early warning system. Tsunamis, earthquakes and other extreme natural phenomena do a lot more damage when they are not predicted.

7. **"Crowd psychology" or "groupthink", better known as the herd mentality.** Think about it, when was the last time that any conventional wisdom in any community was challenged with a true public critical debate? Things like "There is no HIV crisis among Armenians in our community" (no one knows how many Armenians have died of AIDS or are HIV positive), "Armenian youth are not involved in gangs" (There are 15,000 Armenians in California jails), "There is no bullying in Armenian schools" (deny, deny, deny), "Wife beating is only a very rare phenomenon among Armenians" (ask Armenian psychiatrists to give you the real story), "Our only saviour throughout history has been our church, therefore they alone can bring us through these difficult times once again" (we now have an independent country, and it is the Ottoman Sultans that have taught us that our leaders are our religious leaders), "There is no scandalous behaviour among our clergy" (look closely, really closely, the evidence is all around you, or you can play the Name That Khatchakogh game), "There is no potential for fraud in our institutions" (has anyone ever actually had the books audited by any of the big five firms?), "All our resources must be focused on Armenia" (and deplete the Diaspora for good in a few years?), "Our history is proof that we can survive the worst" (It is yet to be proven that we have survived the Genocide), "Gay Armenian rights? What gay Armenians?" (no comment), "There is no physical and sexual abuse of Armenian children in Armenian families" (check with your own families and those of your neighbours or your neighbours' neighbours), "Our school is the best, and parents love sending their children to our school" (so why is enrollment declining? Do we have year to year comparisons? Do we have market research that highlights what parents want or do not want?), "Armenians are not racists" (really?), "All Turks are murderers, it is in their genes" (so all the Turks who have bravely challenged the denials of their country and continue to do so are murderers too), "There are no cowards among Armenians, all our historical figures are heroes" (right, so the traitors in our history should not be analyzed), "People in our community do not appreciate culture and arts, they prefer to have parties, dances and eat Armenian food, so that is why we give them what they want, at least they are getting together (bring on the kebab singers)."

8. **Psychological denial, because of suppressed painful memories that prevent a society from taking the right decisions and basically paralyze it. Two words Medz Yeghern - **

In the final analysis, how many times have you heard, "Do not worry, God will build this church for his glory" (so why are we asking then the community to pay for it blindly?), "The community has the financial resources, so why shouldn't they support this project" (let's see, maybe because the project does not make neither financial nor strategic sense?), "We are a victorious nation, all our enemies over the millennia have disappeared yet we are still here" (so why worry about identity, saving the Diaspora or Armenia, if we are genetically predestined to survive?), "This church/school/community center is a private institution and we can do with it as we please" (so how come it was built with funds raised from the community? And wasn't it built for the community in the first place?).

For the record, one thing that Jared Diamond does not mention. It goes without saying that all those societies that collapsed, never ever had a clue that they were about to do so.

As already mentioned, the Easter Island civilization collapsed and subsequently degenerated into cannibalism. Armenians are notorious for despising each other to the extreme, perhaps that is proof that we have degenerated into our form of "cannibalism"

and we may have already collapsed as a collective.

It would be worthwhile to contact Jared Diamond and ask him to write a book about Armenians. If he does, would that be further proof about us being an endangered species?

