



2020 Visions: An Exploration of Modern Civilization

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2020 has challenged the paradigms of how society is able to function in the long run: a pandemic, furthering climate change, political instability, increasing inequalities. It has been said that fundamental change occurs when parameters become variables (Holsti, 1998). This means we can no longer rely on the structures of human life that we previously considered perpetual and constant. In this article, I consider whether or not some key parameters of global society have experienced such a fundamental change in 2020.

Theories of civilizational collapse are used to explore these parameters and their fortitude. Rather than offering a blanketed yes or no answer to imminent collapse, which would be impossible and futile, this article aims to give entry points to the conversation and show that civilizational sustainability is certainly a question worth bearing in mind as 2021 unfolds. Overall, I argue that there is work ought to be done in the realms of research, politics and activism to design and communicate the kind of resilience strategies that our global civilization needs going forward. Fundamental changes to the conditions of our civilization are happening in a manner beyond an individual's control. However, a collective reaction and construction of new conditions has the potential to safe-guard survival.

I will begin with an introduction to the growing academic literature surrounding civilizational collapse. The following segment will use this literature to examine two crucial parameters of modern civilization and outline how they can be perceived as moving to the domain of 'variables' - namely the agricultural industry and close cohabitation. Finally, I will turn to the way in which we discuss societal collapse – including its securitization as a threat and potential affirmative responses, such as social resilience strategies.

“... fundamental change cannot be characterized as innately ‘good’ or ‘bad’ because it epitomizes the untainted notion of ‘potential’.”

Civilizational collapse is a broad and relatively abstract topic, so I will begin with some disclaimers worth noting. Firstly, fundamental change cannot be characterized as innately 'good' or 'bad' because it epitomizes the untainted notion of 'potential'. A space is cracked open, the political and social veneer falls away, and realities in all shapes and sizes are lined up for inspection. When the right conclusions are drawn, much can be gained from such inspection. Secondly, a plethora of generations have considered themselves at humanity's critical juncture in history - and have had very convincing reasons to do so. The Plague, the World Wars, and the creation of the nuclear bomb barely scratch the surface of reasons to think that humankind is on the brink (North, 2017). This is not the first nor last time the question has been asked and is it not more justified in 2020 than ever before. Nonetheless, 2020 has created defining challenges for the human race that are worth discussing in this context with equal vigor as the aforementioned examples.

Understanding Modern Civilization

At one point in time, the Roman Empire covered 4.4 million square km. Just over eighty years later, the empire had effectively disappeared (Kemp, 2019). The nigh-on mythical rise and fall of such vast power has fascinated scholars from varying studies for decades. However, similar to its big brother in academia, history, the study of civilizational collapse is difficult to pinpoint. Analysis of past collapses risks being tainted by the benefit of hindsight, and therefore bias, whilst predicting collapses is almost impossible to do with any certainty. Nonetheless, tracing common narratives in the field has the power of justifying actions that might improve current problems and steer us, as a collective species, away from the precipice of disaster.

The exact definition of civilization is fraught with debate and disagreement. Despite the need for a practical term with standard interpretation, many scholars and writers include and exclude various elements depending on the nature of their question (Weiner, 2018, Nuwer 2017). That said, we can trace reoccurring themes in the various meanings of civilization to form a broad picture of a society with agriculture, multiple cities and continuous political structures. Modern civilization has also been described as planetary rather than ethnic, national or bound to a particular geographic region (Collins, 2020).

In terms of potential collapse of civilization, there are two central divergences in the literature. Some describe it as a 'decline', taking place over a large amount of time, whilst others claim that the term 'collapse' accurately captures the inevitably abrupt nature of a civilization's grand finale (Kemp, 2019). A second key division follows which separates scholars who believe that collapse forms part of an unavoidable cycle from those who see it as the endpoint of civilization's existence (Kemp, 2019, Weiner, 2018, Dixon 2009).

Overall, the most commonly cited factors of civilizational collapse are as follows; climate change, environmental degradation, inequality and oligarchy, complexity, external shocks and well, misfortune (Nuwer, 2017, Kemp 2019, Weiner, 2018, Collins, 2020). The field of civilizational collapse is extremely wide-ranged, though divided in theory and consequently lacking in copious empirical evidence. However, as the study grows and its main themes begin to enter mainstream politics and news, this might change in the future. In the years and decades to come this kind of research will form an invaluable part of the informational wealth we need to collectively tackle these factors of collapse. The following section's explorations of two particular factors is inspired by existing research and the unforeseen events of last year.

2020 Visions

Infamous for a relentless sequence of tumultuous catastrophes, the year 2020 has come to feel synonymous with the start of a fairly weak joke. However, in this string of chaotic incidents there are two elements most prevalent for this article: climate change and COVID-19. This catastrophic pair is a force to be reckoned with - inspiring controversial and polarized reactions the world over. Adopting a lens that focuses on the conditions of civilization and their viability, the two take on a remarkably different significance.

The term climate change encompasses a host of problems ranging from global warming to the astronomical loss of biodiversity. One driver of climate change helps to link these problems by virtue of the fact that it is involved in the aggravation of almost all of them: agriculture. Emissions from agricultural activities are responsible for up to 31% of all greenhouse gases which are the leading cause of global warming (OECD, meeting of Agriculture Ministers 2018). Furthermore, agriculture is the single largest contributor to biodiversity loss with expanding impacts as a result of changing consumption patterns and growing populations (Dudley and Alexander, 2017). Scientists agree that the fallouts of climate change such as crop failure, desertification and starvation have the potential to wipe out societies all around the world (Kemp, 2019). Others have recorded the potential impact of environmental degradation like deforestation and water pollution as life-threatening for large swathes of global society too (Kemp, 2019).

Yet agriculture is also one of the most easily identifiable markers of our modern civilization. Since the agricultural revolution, we have organized our societies around the production of food in farming and cultivation designed to facilitate economies of scale. The central role of agriculture has often been accepted as one of the most essential conditions of modern civilisation (Dixon, 2009, Weiner, 2018, Kemp, 2019). However, the pandemic temporarily made the production of agricultural goods extremely difficult and posed a serious threat to the industry as a whole (CIHEAM, 2020). COVID-19 regulations restricted the movement of workers, shut down certain food processing and production units and incurred new restraints on food trade policies (Serpil et al, 2020). Suddenly, the question of agriculture's long-term viability loomed in immediate terms and this parameter of civilization shifted. As one Spanish business expert says, 'The global pandemic has repositioned our priorities to value the essentials of life, including food' (Moragues-Faus, 2020, p. 1).

There have been numerous international conventions, acts of protest and public debates, but for the first time, agriculture was threatened in terms of immediate functioning. Finally, it seems that the climate debate moved from relegating the effects of societal structures to questioning the structures themselves (Moragues-Faus, 2020). The enormous infrastructure and workforce behind the production of food was looked at in holistic terms when it came to drafting regulations for the industry's viability (Serpil et al, 2020). Practical policymaking has come to echo the language of activists and idealists. We should have great hope in the emergence of this kind of conversation. Changing the parameters of the climate debate allows us to make choices which other civilizations hardly considered and as a consequence perished. On Easter Island, as they chopped down the last tree and thus sealed their own fate, those same choices vanished and the civilization ate itself out of existence. Hopefully, the rude awakening of food insecurity shifts our paradigm to the sustainability and stability of our agriculture.

As we have seen, the concept of a pandemic is a familiar one in civilizational studies or 'collapsology'. Its core relevance concerns the following fact: avoiding infection means changing the conditions of social interaction on a global level. These social conditions have a wide range but one of the most pressing is the way that humans live together. Our massive cities of incredible population density became hotbeds of infection overnight. Many government leaders declared that population density could be blamed for fueling the spread of the virus (Caron, 2020). The crowded transportation systems, small spaces and skyscraper apartment blocks fail to allow people living in cities to maintain appropriate distances from one another at all times. And yet, since the first human settlers almost 300,000 years ago people have gravitated towards close cohabitation in the form of villages, towns and cities. Prior to 2020, cities all over the world had become more closely connected than ever before in terms of trade and socio-politics. Close cohabitation has been a structure of human civilizations for thousands of years but the threat of COVID-19 has challenged this structure unlike any other time in living memory. Now that government regulations urge us to avoid our neighbors, work from the solitude of our homes and steer clear of all kinds of gathering, the truth of close habitation has become clear: it is not a God-given inevitability, it is a choice. It is, in fact, a variable.

Beyond these two pivotal features of 2020, the year was also marked by civil rights protests by and for people of color and indigenous people living on threatened land. Authors who focus on inequality and oligarchy as precedents for civilizational collapse may find key changes in these events which will affect the way that we tackle the aforementioned challenges as a human collective (Kemp, 2019). When imagining new parameters for global civilizations, social inequality cannot be brushed under the carpet but must also experience a restructuring. Conditions, of a global civilization with a future, must reflect the increasing diversity of social relations in work, education and leisure. Without the commitment of collective action supported by all members of civilization, attempts to restructure areas like agriculture and cohabitation will have little legitimacy or impact. The conversation could be broadened to the overall lack of collaboration between political parties displayed by countries around the world, exposing violence and terrorism as a serious threat to peaceful democracies. As Donne once wrote in his poem about the inevitable bond between humans, "send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee" (1970). In other words, the widening trench between people on the basis of left/right politics has a dark and potent meaning for each and every one of us.

Where to go from here?

“Either we go on as a civilisation or we don’t” (Thunberg 2020)

Though multiple choices lie before us, there are few decisions we can make which will ensure the continuation of modern civilization for the decades to come. One central question before us concerns communication of these meta-challenges in domestic and international politics. Should we adopt a framework of securitization wherein the conditions of modern civilization are presented as highest on every security agenda in the world? Or is this a slippery slope to alarmism and fearmongering? Do alarmist methods even produce desired results in changing people’ attitudes and perceptions? Such questions must start taking more central stage prominence in an era marked by the extreme political divide epitomized by the likes of the Charlottesville protests alongside the kind of grave changes outlined in this article.

A useful way to differentiate between solution-based approaches to the decline of civilization is to distinguish between collapsology, collapsosphy and collapsopraxis (Severigne et al, 2020). Respectively, these terms mean understanding how collapse comes about, imagining solutions to collapse and practically attacking the issues caused by collapse (Servigne et al, 2020). Collapsopraxis is an ever-broadening field of research policy practice which focuses on social resilience strategies and deep adaption. Deep adaption is a relatively new addition to the mix, defined as “synthesising scientific information on major risks and on the possibilities of collapse, taking these risks seriously, informing as many people as possible, taking care of emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects, and organising ourselves politically accordingly” (Servigne et al., 2020). There is space in our education, politics and advocacy for the inclusion of collapsology, collapsosphy and collapsopraxis. Integration of this kind is a vital step in paving the path to civilizational durability.

Therefore, articles that use meta-language to consider global changes in historical perspective can no longer be dismissed as grandiose empty vessels; they must help to introduce this kind of conversation in pragmatic fashion on an international, political level. Climate change, pandemics, nuclear weapons, bread-basket failures, and inequality are all issues which bind us as a species. They have begun to bring about fundamental changes in the way we see our lives and these changes are the precursor to new conversations. Conversations which, when brought to the table, will demand the collective response of humanity as a whole.

“Climate change, pandemics, nuclear weapons, bread-basket failures, and inequality are all issues which bind us as a species.”

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