

The Potential Collapse of American and Western Civilization Internal and External Sources

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I just read in Newsweek [Nov. 7 & 14, 2011, pp. 36-39] Nial Ferguson's "America's 'Oh Sh*t' Moment," a preview of his forthcoming book, Civilization: The West and the Rest [forthcoming, 2012]. Ferguson's discussion of the vulnerability of Western Civilization to collapse if it does not get what he refers to as its six "Killer Apps" in order provoked me to think about what the rudiments are of the flourishing or demise of societies, whether simple or complex. I find Ferguson's essay suggestive, but I find his Apps variables a rather mixed bag that are not so much causal in themselves as they are aspects of culture that display the institutional or behavioral consequences of a more essential tension that all societies manage more or less successfully. My thoughts follow.

Societies, whatever their strengths within themselves to sustain or flourish, can collapse from outside or external forces: disease; sudden geological or climatic upheavals; invasion by overwhelming numbers or by those with superior technology; failure to compete economically. In recent times, as the world economy has become more and more integrated under the influence of the policies of the World Trade Organization, but where the competing countries have very different standards of living, corporations have taken advantage of the option to move to locations where their labor and/or materials costs are reduced in order to be more competitive or profitable. The loss for one community, state or country can be a gain for another, but if the losing group does not adjust, it can easily slide into decline for economic reasons. At the national level, America is now challenged generally by this situation as outsourcing of both a great deal of manufacturing and even professional services puts significant pressure on the high consumption based standard of living of U.S. citizens. It is not at all clear whether America will be smart enough to adjust creatively so its citizens can pursue the kinds of employment that are viable in the world marketplace and thereby continue to enjoy a high standard of living. If America and the West do not adjust, it is entirely possible that while American investments abroad and increased foreign consumption will sustain a strong American economy at the investment level, the standard of living for most Americans may well decline. As less developed countries emerge, we could even see our "best and brightest" emigrate to take advantage of opportunities elsewhere, much as America has experienced others coming here as we have flourished.

Ecological factors, especially resource depletion, can also be a significant external influence causing societal decline. In most instances these depletions occur over rather long periods of time, and as such they can or should be anticipated with the society making appropriate creative adjustments. Humans are, after all, the most adaptive of all complex species, and they can utilize a huge range of different resources to sustain themselves. In addition, they can move to better locations fairly rapidly if circumstances require it. But there are limitations, and it is also true that humans can be good at denying the need for change until sometimes it is too late. Considering 1) the limited natural resources of the Earth [fresh water, minerals, metals, arable land, etc.] that are currently under unsustainable demand pressure, 2) uncontrolled population growth, and 3) the commitment of the nations of the world to both an ever expanding economy and to an ever higher standard of living for all world citizens, it is entirely possible that the world economy itself may collapse within the next generation or two. If this should occur, a great many societies may collapse together – western societies as well as developing societies. At the present time, it is not at all certain that the human community will stop expecting that it can always find new ways to exploit the Earth to support what have become the ravenous demands of a species whose increasing population is essentially out of control.

In many instances, societies fail because of a combination of internal and external factors with internal weaknesses making them vulnerable to outside forces. While outside forces are fairly easy to identify, just what the internal conditions are that promote strength and sustainability or weakness and vulnerability are more difficult to discern. As in Ferguson's analysis, most assessments of internal vulnerability focus on the particular condition of a society's institutions – its social organization, polity, economics, defense, religion, etc. My view is that there is a more fundamental internal tension that human societies and cultures must manage successfully that is the underlying internal source for societies flourishing and sustaining or being vulnerable to decline or collapse. Secondly, the conditions in the institutions of a society reflect a society's success in managing this tension. And interestingly, while this tension can never be resolved, it can be balanced to the most beneficial effect.

At any level of complexity – from bands to global civilizations – societies have to contend with two fundamental and countervailing internal principles or forces. Depending on the degree of balance these societies and cultures achieve and maintain in and across their institutions with respect to these two complementary principles or forces, they are more or less sustainable for greater or lesser periods of time. To the degree societies are imbalanced, they

are vulnerable to forces within or without that put them at more or less greater risk of decline or collapse. These rudimentary principles are self-interest, which is the manifestation of the competitive imperative and serves individual biological benefit and survival, and communal interest, which is the manifestation of the cooperative imperative and serves social or group benefit and survival.

Of course, while it is useful for analytical purposes to discuss these complementary principles as a dichotomy, I am well aware that what I am really identifying is a continuum with these two forces at the extremes. The same will be true when I later discuss a second and corresponding dichotomy: Intellect and Intuition. In most real circumstances it is not either one or the other of these forces or faculties that is operative but both operating to different degrees. Balance occurs at the point on the continuum where the input of one force or faculty equals that of the other at some perspective or scale of consideration. In this essay, I will be considering how balance builds, accumulates and is achieved, or not, at the scale of society overall.

In and across their institutions, all societies must deal creatively with the tension between these two principles or forces – self-interest and communal interest. And all societies must do this at all the relevant levels of social organization from the single individual to the family, to the band, to the tribe or community, to the region, to the state, to the nation, to the international consortium. The tension between commitment to self-interest versus commitment to communal interest exists throughout the social structural network in and across all levels of social complexity. Whether it is an individual, family or nation, the perspective of self-interest is in fact communal within its own frame of social reference. It becomes anti-communal or self-interested from an alternative scale or perspective. In this regard, an action that produces a result that is “good” and of communal benefit for a family [stashing food away in a time of famine] may be self-centered and negative in its effect from the perspective of the larger community [where food is needed to be shared more broadly].

The most successful, and potentially the most sustainable and longest lasting, societies and cultures balance in the most creative ways this tension within and across these layers and levels of social organization. But neither individuals nor societies are consistent in their application of either the perspective of self-interest or communalism. They tend to shift from one perspective to the other in different circumstances or times, and they frequently contradict themselves in the process – often without even being aware of it. Dealing constructively with the ever-present tension between the competing principles of self-interest and communal interest is the single greatest challenge to all individuals and social

groups at all levels as they seek to define appropriate human behavior and social relations.

Fortunately, humans are endowed with the mental faculties to take on the challenge. Use of the Intellect [reason and analysis] provides humans with an awareness of objective reality and, in carving up reality into separate parts and seeking their causal relationships, it supports a self-interested perspective to assure survival in a competitive, predatory environment. Reason can also “argue” for communal commitment by invoking ethical “oughts,” but the “rules” that emanate from this secular derivation in support of cooperative behavior are rather weak. In contrast to the Intellect, Intuition provides humans with access to an awareness of subjective reality and supports a communal perspective to advance social sensitivity and commitment. Use of Intuition reveals the undifferentiated whole, the interconnectedness of all of reality, and at its deepest level it offers the experience of self as other or as all other persons, creatures and things [unification]. And when we discover others are ourselves, we realize that our treatment of them is in fact treatment of ourselves; so, through this awareness and experience, we are absolutely obliged to respect and consider the needs and perspectives of others, even all others [the communal perspective].

In providing access to the experience of one’s own identity being shared at an essential level with others, Intuition requires social obligation to others and it infuses gut level moral support for the commitment to respect and cooperation that the intellect serves up only as a desirable idea. So, the rational or intellectual faculty in humans serves in the main the principle or force of self-interest, while the intuitive faculty serves in the main the principle of communal interest. Balance in the development and use of these two mental faculties in the citizens of a society correlates with a society that is better able to balance the tension in and among its institutions, between the force for self-interest and the force for communal interest. And balanced citizens and balanced institutions constitute the ideal internal state for a society of any complexity to remain viable for the long term.

Some are likely to ask, “What role do impulses and emotions play in this self-interest vs. communal interest dynamic?” Impulses, or automatic responses/reactions, serve mainly a biological survival function and so align with the Intellect in supporting the principle of self-interest. Emotions run the gamut from love to hate, fear to joy. For the most part, the positive emotions [love, joy, etc.] align with the Intuitive and support social connection and so amplify the principle of communal interest. The negative emotions [fear, hate, etc.] typically support biological survival and the principle of self-interest.

Emotions amplify one way or the other the two principles, while impulses offer automatic responses in behalf of self-interest. So, Impulses and Emotions complicate the picture, but they do not change the essential tension between the two fundamental principles emanating from the Intellect and the Intuitive. Collectively Impulses and Emotions somewhat favor biological survival and self-interest, and as such they offset the relatively weak option within the Intellect to argue from a secular point of view for communal interests.

Overall, the conclusion is that basic human capabilities [impulses, emotions, intellect, and intuition] are potentially balanced in their ability to support both self-interested and communal principles as societies develop. But different cultures support development of these basic human capabilities/faculties to different degrees, and that fact in turn influences the ability of these different societies to achieve an appropriate balance in their institutions. We should expect the imbalances in and among the institutions of any one culture to reflect the imbalances in the development and use of the corresponding human capabilities among its citizens.

Now we can consider how balance in these principles, these perspectives, and these faculties plays out in the course of cultural and societal development. We can start by recognizing that as a whole, hunter-gatherer societies [bands, tribes and simpler chiefdoms] in their diverse forms exhibit a high degree of balance. We might expect this since these societies are relatively simple organizationally and have had at least one hundred and fifty thousands of years to discover what is needed to be successful and sustainable. By contrast, complex societies [feudal chiefdoms, states, and civilizations/ empires] are very recent developments in terms of overall human history – only the last ten thousand years, and it should come as no surprise that these cultures are still exploring alternative ways to achieve balance within the challenge of their additional levels of complexity.

Bands and tribes learned to balance rather well the principles of competition [self-interest or individualism] and cooperation [communalism] throughout the social layers and institutions of their cultures. In these “simple” societies, life and all of reality is suffused with a sacred principle of connectedness which is expressed culturally through a belief and ritual system that accounts for individual and social origins, that requires ethical behavior at all levels, and that answers the question of individual death usually in terms of some form of survival, most often as spirits of the ancestors [which continue to take an interest in and support the band or tribe]. Commitment to a work ethic is a requirement for individual and social survival. Technology is simple and shared broadly, but there is no time for the separate pursuits of science or the role of

the scientist. Consumption fills the need of survival and celebration, but excessive accumulation of either wealth or power is restrained by obligations to support the group and to respect the limits of the natural world from which resources are taken. Social obligation and respect for others [communalism] are grounded in the fundamental spiritual principle of connectedness. In spite of the many ways these “simple” societies find to emphasize a communal orientation, there are, nevertheless, many opportunities for individuals to display their special talents and to be recognized and rewarded for their individual accomplishments. Consensus among the elders is the basis for communal action, but typically there are many options for families and individuals to join and participate at different levels. Medicine is rudimentary and grounded both in the sacred as well as in the objective/pragmatic.

The development of complex society, beginning in a very limited way only 10,000 years ago, is based on much larger, more highly structured population groups as supported by agriculture [rarely aquatic culture] in permanent settlements. Complexity brought specialization of roles [eventually scientists], and codified law, superior technology, and more emphasis on pragmatic medicine. But while early complex society made these important gains, its social, political and economic institutions [class structure, kingship/theocracy, royal ownership and control of all resources] sacrificed the balance of relatively egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, and supported gross inequality across what often became fixed classes of society. The inclusive social myths and rituals in simpler societies, which were supported by the connectedness/spiritual principle, were transformed into institutionalized religion which reserved contact with the sacred to the privileged few [priests] and supported highly differentiated social systems of oligarchic privilege. Forced labor – slavery and the lesser forms of serfdom and indenture – replaced labor based on a commitment to a balance of self-preservation and group need. The average citizen in most of these early complex societies was as a result dispossessed of the basis for a meaningful identity in the process.

The history of modern civilization [since the Greeks some 2,500 years ago] is really a history of complex society trying to rediscover the balance of hunter-gatherers in social structure, polity and economy, while retaining and advancing its gains in science, medicine, and technology to support an improved standard of living for all of its densely packed citizens. Often through revolt and revolution, modern western societies [only in the last 500 years] have implemented democratic principles in the institutions of polity, education, and justice/law. By doing so, these societies first managed to substantially counter the self-interested extremes of kingship, class and caste and then to restrain [through regulation] the excessive, self-interested influence of free enterprise

capitalism. The result was to create a social condition where all individuals and groups can pursue personal gain [self-interest] but where this pursuit is restrained by insisting on both the rights of all individuals and groups to participate in decision making and the obligations of all citizens to contribute fairly to the needs of the larger society at all levels [communal interest].

Most modern Western societies have achieved this more egalitarian and communally oriented condition in part by separating civil society from religion, which had previously supported the oligarchy in one form or another. While this separation may have been necessary initially, unfortunately, spirituality, together with the sacred principle in self, reality and society, was marginalized in the process. This situation has left modern civilized society without a moral [spiritual] basis of support for its secularly derived [ethical] rules of behavior. The old religions have railed against this loss, but instead of adjusting and discovering and promoting their mutual spiritual core or foundation, they have instead either encouraged pulses of reactionary religious fundamentalism of all sorts or lingered on the sidelines as mostly philosophical organizations calling on faith to “somehow” support ethics and tolerance. So, while these traditional religions are accurate in identifying a real loss, they offer no substantial or useful solution by having retreated into either social philosophy or fundamentalism.

In my view, collapse of societies, whether simple or complex, is likely to occur from internal sources when they cease to be balanced with respect to individual and social values [self-interest and communal interest principles] throughout and across their institutions and/or when they deny a meaningful place to cultural universals – like spirituality [access to and recognition of the importance of the subjective/sacred in knowing self and reality]. The corollary is that societies, whether simple or complex, become sustainable long-term when they attain and maintain this comprehensive condition of balance and inclusiveness. The essential challenge is no different for complex civilizations than it is for simple human bands. Civilizations merely must meet this challenge through more highly formalized organizational structures and across a much greater extent of impersonal relations.

Modern Western Civilization has achieved much in moving complex societies in the direction of greater balance. Its weakness lies in having peripheralized the spiritual [and with it the intuitive human faculty] and in allowing traditional religions to continue to represent the spiritual universal in a modern context where their contributions are inadequate, even counterproductive. The effect is to diminish the influence of the spiritual awareness of subjective reality [the interconnectedness and shared identity of all things] to provide moral support

for the principle of communal interests. Ethical rules originating in the intellect are not sufficient in human societies to counter balance the strong forces for self-interest. The consequence is that modern western societies are constantly having to reassert communal interests [through regulation, taxation, law enforcement, etc.] in reaction to the excessive forces of self-interest [anti-social, aggressive and criminal behavior, and the unrestrained pursuits of capitalism and of the privileged few to corral wealth, power and influence].

In my view, until western culture replaces its traditional religions with true spirituality and reincorporates into the society's social network the communal ethos that spirituality supports, it will continue to struggle with the condition of internal imbalance, and it will limit the progress Western Civilization can make to maximize the window of opportunity for the human species. If the modern forces for self-interest [mostly conservative political, economic, and religious groups and parties] are successful in instituting their reactionary agendas in Western countries, the result will be greater imbalance in the tension between the forces of self-interest and communal interest and greater risk of the collapse of Western Civilization. Especially in America, we already favor rather decidedly the individualistic, competitive, self-interest side in the tug of war of principles that underlies the internal success or failure of all societies.

Conclusion

External causes of societal decline are many and various, as identified at the beginning of this essay, and American and western societies face significant challenges from these sources. If we expect Western Civilization to have the best opportunity to persist in the long term, we must attend to both external and internal threats to its persistence in an ever more interconnected world. My view is that we are very unlikely to be successful in dealing with the external threats if we do not attend to the fundamental internal source of imbalance in our civilization. To address this imbalance, I suggest that we must complete the transformation of modern complex society and achieve parity in the overall influence of the forces of self-interest and communal interest, a transformation that can be greatly facilitated by reincorporating true spirituality throughout the fabric of our complex society and civilization.