



Research Paper

# Beyond Collapse: Archaeology and the Fate of Civilization

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## Abstract

*This paper critically examines prevailing theories of civilizational collapse, arguing that both internal and external explanatory models are inherently limited and often reflect Eurocentric assumptions about societal development. Drawing on archaeological insights, the study challenges the fragmented analysis of individual "civilizations" and instead proposes a holistic understanding of human society as an integrated whole. Through a diachronic exploration of material culture and human-tool relationships, the paper contends that increasing technological dependence and systemic inequality represent existential threats to contemporary civilization. By reorienting civilizational inquiry toward an archaeological framework, this study highlights the imperative of recognizing entrapment in material systems as a central danger in the trajectory of human development.*

## Keywords

*civilizational collapse; archaeological approach; material culture; Eurocentrism; societal entrapment; internal and external theories; historical methodology; human-tool dependency; inequality; modern civilization*

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## I. Introduction

In ancient India, a group of nine blind men attempted to gain an understanding of the physical appearance of an elephant. They were unable to see the elephant, so they proceeded to touch different parts of it. The first blind man touched the elephant's head and stated that he believed the elephant was like a water jar. The second man touched the elephant's ears and asserted his belief that the elephant was like a winnowing basket. The ninth blind man, however, disagreed, declaring that the elephant rather resembled a broom, as he had touched the elephant's tail[ "Udana." Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, [https://cdn.britannica.com/primary\\_source/gutenberg/PGCC\\_classics/canon/khuddaka/udana/ud6-04.html](https://cdn.britannica.com/primary_source/gutenberg/PGCC_classics/canon/khuddaka/udana/ud6-04.html). Accessed 16 June 2024.]. This anecdote, popularly known as "The Blind Men and the Elephant," exemplifies the importance of comprehending the entirety of a subject rather than focusing on isolated details.

The attempt to predict the fate of the entire human civilization by studying the collapse of individual civilizations is akin to the idea of blind men coming to know the entire elephant by touching some of its parts. This approach is flawed for two reasons. First, the most prominent internal and external theories about the collapse of individual civilizations are indefensible because they implausibly posit that civilized societies are either unchangeable dinosaurs or runaway trains. Second, the very concept of individual civilizations is unscientific due to its European centralistic implications.

## Internal and External Theories

Proponents of external forces behind the collapse of the Roman Empire often attribute its downfall to foreign invasions, depletion of resources, and natural disasters. For example, McDougal Littell's high school textbook *Patterns of Interaction* describes the Roman Empire's undoing as a direct consequence of the Germanic invasion[ McDougal Littell. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal Littell, 2000, p. 176.]. Other externalist scholars posit that scarcity of resources precipitated the Empire's downfall. They observe that cereal pollen volume declined precipitously during the late stages of this era, while tree pollen volume increased. Consequently, it is conceivable that the collapse was caused by deficiencies in agricultural production[Waeteringe, W. Groenman van. "The Disastrous Effects of the Roman Occupation." *Roman and Native in the Low Countries: Spheres of Interaction*, edited by Roel Brandt and Jan Slofstra, pp. 147-57. *British Archaeological Reports International Series* 184.]. Moreover, historians also argue that other external factors, such as environmental disasters, lead to the eventual disintegration of Roman society. Professor Kyle Harper, for instance, proposes that germs were far more dangerous for Romans than barbarians because the combination of

fever, malaria, smallpox, and other epidemic diseases laid the foundation for collapse even before the Germanic invasion happened[ Harper, Kyle. *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. p. 18.].

External factors like diminished resources, foreign invasions, and natural disasters have likewise been cited by theorists to explain the collapse of other civilizations. The Mayans, for instance, were impacted by soil erosion, land scarcity, and the silting of lakes, which ultimately led to their demise. The downfall of the Harappan civilization is often attributed to the superior military technology of invading Aryans. In the case of natural disasters, the Minoan civilization experienced a volcanic eruption that destroyed its inland palaces, precipitating its eventual devastation. While external forces may appear to explain massive societal declines, theories founded on these factors are ultimately flawed. Civilized societies like the Roman Empire often had strong central governments, efficient bureaucratic organization, and powerful militaries to face external challenges. Is it possible that such advanced societies, by their very nature, were simply incapable of responding to any serious external challenges, just like dinosaurs[ Tainter, Joseph. *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 59.]?

In contrast, theorists who place the blame for wide-scale collapse on internal forces believe that conflicts or poor societal integration within the Roman Empire led to its downfall. The Marxist theory posits that societal conflicts rooted in matters like class struggle are a primary cause of many collapses. For instance, historian G.E.M. de Ste. Croix suggests that starting with the Severan period, the Roman Empire's decline was precipitated by intensifying tensions between the social elite and the indigent, which resulted in the latter losing all hope of improving their legal status[ de Ste. Croix, G. E. M.. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. Duckworth, 1989, p. 454.]. Moreover, some scholars argue that internal societal integration also contributed to the downfall of the Empire. Guglielmo Ferrero, for instance, cites urbanization as a primary factor. Ferrero asserts that over-urbanization resulted in a severe depletion of resources in rural areas, ultimately leading to the empire's inability to sustain itself[ Ferrero, Guglielmo. *Ancient Rome and Modern America: A Comparative Study of Morals and Manners*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914.].

Not unlike the aforementioned theories, internal factors such as societal conflict and flawed integration have been used to explain the collapse of other civilizations. For instance, the breakdown of the Han Empire is often attributed to conflicts between landlords and peasants, given that the landlord class in the Han Dynasty engaged in pervasive land annexation, which resulted in peasants losing their arable land and eventually, revolting. In addition, the collapse of the Aztec civilization is often attributed to the integration of religion. The Aztecs' over-reliance on human sacrifices to consolidate their power resulted in conquered populations collaborating with the Spaniards, who ultimately destroyed the Aztec Empire.

Much like theories of collapse founded on external factors, internally focused ones merely offer plausible explanations. It is implausible that the social elites who build civilized societies would be utterly irrational. Therefore, it is equally implausible that they would consistently turn a blind eye to the oppressed lower classes. In the same vein, is it possible that advanced societies would fail to see the dangers of overdependence on religion and urbanization, and thus remain fixed on the road to calamity like a runaway train[ Tainter, Joseph. *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 75.]? The reasoning underlying externally and internally focused schools of thought are untenable, as both groups see civilized societies as either dinosaurs incapable of responding to external challenges or snowballing entities doomed to destruction.

### **Concept of Civilization and Archaeological approach**

In addition, the very concept of civilization is problematic because it contains Eurocentric value judgments. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, the meaning of "civilizations" (a plural) refers to the "state of human society that is very developed and organized."["Civilization." Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/civilization>. Accessed 16 June 2024.] However, this pluralized notion of civilizations carries a strong societal evolutionary implication because it emphasizes the term "very developed." Who has the authority to determine whether a society is "very developed"? According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the concept of "very developed" civilizations as advanced societies was first recorded in 1772["Civilization." Etymonline, Douglas Harper, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/civilization>. Accessed 16 June 2024.], during a period when European colonialism was rapidly evolving. The association of European colonialism with the emergence of the concept of advanced civilizations was not a coincidence. Indeed, Europeans often used the idea of "civilizing missions" to rationalize their colonization of other regions after the 18th century. Conversely, when answering the question "Is our civilization in danger?", the meaning of the singular "civilization" necessarily means "all the people in the world and the societies they live in, considered as a whole."["Civilization." Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/civilization>. Accessed 16 June 2024.] This encompasses the entirety of human society, regardless of whether it is "very developed" or not. Consequently, a conclusion that all of human civilization can be defined by studying the European

centralistic idea of “advanced civilizations” is akin to blind men touching elephants, as it fails to consider the many “undeveloped” societies within the whole. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a more holistic perspective by examining the current state of human civilization.

The archaeological approach is the most appropriate methodology for comprehensively understanding the evolution of human civilization. Rather than focusing on specific advanced civilizations, the archaeological perspective is a long-term, all-encompassing study of collective human progression. Although modern scientists view humans as *Homo sapiens*, archaeologists view human beings as *Homo faber*, meaning they can adapt to the environment by making tools and thus evolve from the relationship between humans and things [Hodder, Ian. *Studies in human-thing entanglement*. Creative Commons: Ian Hodder, 2016.]. The mutual relations between humans and things constitute the principal vein of the history of human civilization as a whole, and signal that the entire human civilization is in danger.

More than 10,000 years ago, humans were hunter-gatherers whose success was almost determined by a single factor – the extent of mobility. As a result of the constraints of mobility, humans are unlikely to have possessed a great many material things. Consequently, they were more inclined to be opportunistic, utilizing a variety of nearby resources to create tools like flint hand axes, spear points, and blades. Consequently, a hunter-gatherer during the Paleolithic period could easily transport all their belongings in a handbag and embark on a nomadic existence.

Around 10,000 years ago, however, humans gradually transitioned from hunter-gatherers to farmers. As the success of an agricultural society depends on the stability of food production, farmers are obliged to manage their crops to secure their own well-being. Consequently, human beings settled in defined areas and created material things, including permanent houses, large irrigation systems, and implements like plows. A handbag could no longer hold all the items a farmer owned.

Following the 18th century, the advent of industrialization transformed farmers into consumers. The key to success in industrialized societies was the speed at which capital could generate profits. The more goods capitalists sold, the more prosperity a country gained. In this framework, factories began operating around the clock to produce brand-new televisions, washing machines, and family cars. To sell a wide range of industrial products, department stores, mail catalogs, and mass advertisements started competing for consumer attention. It is difficult to imagine the number of components and the sheer volume of advertising that would have been required to sell the earliest cars, for instance. This is something that a farmer living 10,000 years ago could not have imagined.

Optimists may suggest that the proliferation of inventions reflects a positive trajectory of human advancement. However, the more we rely on things to solve our problems, the more we are entrapped by them because we have too many things to maintain. Some 30,000 years ago, a hunter-gatherer could repair a stone axe by sourcing a suitable stone, a process that would have taken no more than half an hour. A farmer living 7,000 thousand years ago might have realised that the walls of his house were about to implode. To repair the structure, he would have had to bring in fresh mud from the river, wrap it in hay, harden the hay wrap with fire, and sandwich wood cut from the forest within the hay wrap. Unlike natural objects, artifacts require maintenance. As human history progresses, the mission of maintaining artefacts makes humans become more and more entrapped by them. How many parts does a mechanic need to check to repair a car today? How many tools are needed to repair brakes, electronics, tires, and engines, respectively? How many things, like automobiles, require an extremely large, complex, and delicate network of labor and materials to keep functioning? How would cities function without such networks? Considering this predicament, human civilization is in danger because of human beings’ dependency on things.

People in “developed countries” typically do not feel entrapped by objects because the entrapment is often borne by people from developing countries. Take Christmas as an example: when this widely celebrated holiday rolls around, many people boasts an elaborately decorated Christmas tree. Behind the festivities, only a select few understand the resulting scale of environmental pollution and long working hours laborers from developing countries endure to process these trees and manufacture the ornaments. To cite just one example, the widespread dependence on Christmas trees and light bulbs suggests our civilization is in danger, especially when that danger is masked by the inequality of scale: we are producing far less in terms of collective societal benefit. We need to be more aware of the entrapment that things place on people, and likewise, more aware of the need to adopt a holistic perspective and view human civilization as a whole.

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