

Intersecting Perspectives: Exploring Theories of Civilizational Decline and The Case of the United States

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Author Biography

Anwen Hao is a senior at The Harker School in San Jose, California. Anwen is interested in the subjects history and philosophy, and in the future he wishes to pursue a career in law. He first gained interest in writing this particular article after observing various stressors that seemed to operate on the United States at the same time (weakening economy and a surge in political violence), and he wanted to investigate whether these indicators were truly indicative of societal decline. In his free time, he enjoys dancing ballet and fencing. Anwen also enjoys taking care of and playing with his two pet cats.

Abstract

This paper investigates the potential indicators of civilizational decline in the United States by synthesizing theories from *Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Collapse* by Jared Diamond, and *How Civil Wars Start* by Barbara F. Walter. Acemoglu and Robinson attribute the success or failure of civilizations to the nature of their political and economic institutions, distinguishing between inclusive and extractive systems. Diamond focuses on environmental factors and societal responses to ecological challenges, while Walter explores the causes and indicators of civil disorder. By examining and comparing these arguments and their case studies, the paper reveals how these theories complement and conflict with each other. Applying these insights to contemporary America, the analysis identifies potential signs of decline, such as wealth inequality, environmental degradation, and political factionalism. Despite these indicators, the paper also highlights the potential for resilience and improvement, emphasizing the importance of addressing both institutional and environmental challenges to foster a sustainable and prosperous future. Ultimately, it underscores the dual necessity of acknowledging problems and maintaining hope to motivate constructive action and societal progress.

Keywords: Civilizational Decline, Political Institutions, Economic Institutions, Environmental Challenges, Civil Disorder, Wealth Inequality, Political Polarization, Anocracy, Environmental Degradation, Social Resilience, Institutional Analysis, Internal Strife

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, a weakening economy, a surge in political violence. The United States seems to be experiencing multiple stresses simultaneously, and a natural question that emerges is whether these signs are indicative of civilizational decline in the country. To answer this question, one would have to analyze a myriad of factors and how they affect the trajectory of society.

Scholars have already provided some theories about this topic, and we can synthesize their theories to build a more robust hypothesis that considers all sides of the situation. We will be investigating the arguments of *Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Collapse* by Jared Diamond, and *How Civil Wars Start* by Barbara F. Walter. *Why Nations Fail* argues that the fate of civilization lies in its political and economic institutions. *Collapse* posits that whether a society declines depends on how humanity treats the natural environment. *How Civil Wars Start* investigates the causes and indicators of civil disorder, and we will analyze the connection between internal strife and decline.

This paper will examine the arguments of each work and analyze their saliency. It will conclude by describing how these pieces complement and conflict with each other. Our hope is that by relating these three works and their perspectives, we can gain a more comprehensive view of the topic of societal decline.

***Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson**

Why Nations Fail, by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, posits that whether or not a country is rich or poor depends on its internal organization. These internal organizations can be classified into inclusive institutions and extractive institutions. Political and economic structures that distribute power widely are referred to as inclusive institutions. These systems thus harness the intellectual power of the people by giving them incentives to invest and innovate. In contrast, extractive institutions enrich a smaller elite by exploiting and extracting wealth from the majority through their political and economic structures. Therefore, extractive institutions

hinder the country's ability to innovate and fail to provide the people with basic needs such as potable water and infrastructure (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013, pp. 70-95).

Inclusive and extractive systems are established through centuries of history, which involves the interactions between what the authors call "small differences and critical junctures." The scholars argue that critical junctures amplify small institutional differences between countries. For example, before the Age of Exploration, both England and Spain were relatively absolutist and extractive countries, but a key yet small difference was that the Spanish monarchy had a firmer grip on its power than the English Crown. After the discovery of the Americas, Spain's monarchy was thus able to monopolize its trade with the Americas, but the English Crown could not, creating a powerful class of merchants who lacked ties to the monarchy. Consequently, Spain grew more absolutist while England's monarchy lost more power, amplifying the originally small institutional differences between the countries. These interactions between small differences and critical junctures play a major role in the institutional paths that countries take (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013, pp. 105-110).

Once an institution is established, it tends to persist, for better or for worse. Both inclusive and extractive institutions create positive feedback loops that reinforce themselves. In the case of inclusive institutions, the broad distribution of power makes it increasingly more difficult for a smaller elite to impose its control and also makes power less valuable (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013, pp. 302-310). In the case of extractive institutions, the overwhelming power of a single entity makes it more difficult to impose checks on it. Even if another group takes over under the promise that it would establish pluralism, it will soon realize the opportunities of continuing extractive institutions since there are little existing checks on its power (this is in fact what happens in much of post-colonial Africa) (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013, pp. 335-344).

However, the authors note that history is not destiny, and that institutions may change. China, for example, changed from being an absolutist communist regime into an extractive institution with some inclusive features. This was because the death of Mao Zedong, the founder of the Chinese

Communist Party, created a power vacuum for a conflict between institutions to ensue. Deng Xiaoping and his supporters eventually came out on top, and he reformed China's system to generate rapid economic growth (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013, pp. 420-427).

In each stage of the book's argument, Acemoglu and Robinson gather evidence from all over the world to support their claims. Each case that they present fits into their theory, although they are intensely focused on the internal structures of a country and may be underestimating the role of external factors (such as war). By structuring the research question as a purely institutional subject, the historians suggest that to lift a country out of poverty, the country must transition from an extractive to an inclusive institution, yet they do not address the problems and turmoil that may arise from this transition. As we will see later with Barbara F. Walter's interpretation of the fall of nations, moving from an autocratic system to a democratic one entails significant restructuring that may uproot the lives of civilians. It is also difficult to classify all institutions into either inclusive or extractive institutions in the first place; many governments contain a combination of the two categories. Acemoglu and Robinson provide a compelling argument to explain current events, but they do not enumerate concrete solutions to the inequality among nations.

Collapse by Jared Diamond

Acemoglu and Robinson investigate the factors of decline inherent with the governmental system. In contrast, in *Collapse*, Jared Diamond focuses more on environmental aspects and factors that the people do not have control over. For clarity, Diamond defines a *Collapse* as "a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time." He examines case studies from both ancient and modern times, and through his study, he formulates a five-point framework, which consists of manmade environmental damage, changes in climate, conflicts with enemies, lack of trade/support from allies, and society's response to these problems (Diamond, 2011, p. 1-27).

Diamond's most salient case study from ancient societies is the disappearance of the Greenland Norse. The Norse have developed sophisticated

sailboat technology to not only conquer areas in the rest of Europe but also explore and settle in other areas of the Atlantic, including Greenland and Iceland. The Greenland Norse suffered from all five problems. The environment was extremely fragile, susceptible to drastic changes in temperature and climate on an annual basis, making food sources for the Norse extremely unstable (Diamond, 2011, p. 222-235). However, the Inuit survived in Greenland even after the Norse disappeared, which suggests that surviving on the island was not impossible. Even though the Inuit possessed superior abilities for surviving on the island, the Norse refused to adopt native methods. From the outset, the Norse developed a hostile relationship with the Inuit, and their scorn for non-Christian peoples hindered them from embracing the hunting strategies and diet of the more successful Inuit. These factors laid the foundation for the ultimate cause of the fall of the Norse, while the proximate cause for the Norse was a significant decrease in temperature around the globe, resulting in famine that the Norse never recovered from (Diamond, 2011, p. 248-255).

Like Acemoglu and Robinson, Diamond includes a case study on China, although from a very different perspective. Diamond analyzes the detrimental and widespread impacts of China's pollution of rivers and the air, as well as a myriad of other environmental issues. Diamond claims that China's problems stem from its extremely inefficient use of energy. He also emphasizes the impact of China's problems, since other countries share the same Earth as China and thus would have to suffer the same consequences. He hopes that the leadership in China would be able to recognize these environmental problems and enact change quickly.

Although Diamond's case studies all fit his model, Diamond's argument is not compelling because it devotes too much of the framework to the effect of environmental problems on a society's direction. In other words, Diamond has inverted the power dynamic of humanity versus nature. Humanity has mastered nature to a much larger extent than the civilizations that he studies, and he underestimated the flexibility and the exponential progress of societies over the centuries. In fact, the annual rate of deaths per 100,000 due to famine is only 0.5% in the 2010s compared to 50% in the 1960s (Hasell & Roser, 2013).

***How Civil Wars Start* by Barbara F. Walter**

Unlike the previous historians mentioned, Barbara F. Walter focuses primarily on civil disorder and political violence in *How Civil Wars Start* instead of societal decline in general. The ultimate purpose of her book is to connect the political violence in the United States with previous instances of civil war to determine how close the country is to internal conflict.

Walter proposes that governments that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic are the most vulnerable to civil war. These types of governments are known as “anocracies,” and one way these forms of governments can emerge is during the transition from democracy to autocracy. We will see that this form of transformation will be particularly relevant to the current situation in the United States (Walter, 2022, p. 19).

Democracies frequently erode into autocracies because leaders ignore the customs and precedents of the democratic system. These leaders claim that the democratic government is unreliable and weak, and they persuade voters that a more centralized governance is needed, frequently using the term “law and order.” When these leaders come to power, protestors reject the notion of an autocratic government, but supporters of the aspiring autocrats also resist any attempts to return to democracy (Walter, 2022, p. 19-22).

Walter uses a case study on Ukraine to illustrate this concept. After Viktor Yanukovich took office in 2010, he advocated for increasing ties with Russia and displayed many autocratic tendencies, imprisoning political rivals and limiting the freedom of the press. As a result, protestors took to the streets to oppose Yanukovich’s pro-Russia policies and demand new elections. Although the demonstrations replaced Yanukovich with Petro Poroshenko, a pro-Europe businessman, the newly established democratic government was too weak to quell resistance from Yanukovich’s loyalists. Ukraine quickly descended into civil war as divisions between pro- and anti-Russia groups erupted into violence (Walter, 2022, p. 23-26).

In addition to a country’s governing system, ethnic and religious divisions contribute to the likelihood of civil war. Civil wars are increasingly

fought between ethnic and religious groups, instead of groups of different social strata or of different ideologies (Walter, 2022, p. 33-34). However, it was not the number of ethnic or religious groups that determined the likelihood of civil war: “It was an acute form of political polarization that they called ‘factionalism.’ Countries that factionalize have political parties based on ethnic, religious, or racial identity rather than ideology, and these parties then seek to rule at the exclusion and expense of others” (Walter, 2022, p. 35). It is the exploitation of ethnic and religious differences to promote hostility that makes civil wars likely. These ethnic divisions are very inflexible, which makes it easy for conflict to arise (Walter, 2022, p. 36).

To demonstrate this principle at play, Walter investigates the civil war in Yugoslavia. Albanians in Kosovo demanded independence from the Serbian republic because of their resentment for the more well-off Serbians. Slobodan Milosevic decided to exploit these divisions by claiming Serbian dominance and oppressing other ethnic groups, stirring up mutual fear and hatred among ethnic groups. This is an example of exclusion of other ethnic groups motivating internal conflicts (Walter, 2022, p. 30-33).

The third factor that increases chances of civil war is when groups of people feel that their political power is being threatened: “... the most powerful determinant of violence, researchers discovered, was the trajectory of a group’s political status. People were especially likely to fight if they had once held power and saw it slipping away” (Walter, 2022, p. 63). This feeling of losing power can be particularly potent if the group of people in question are “sons of the soil,” meaning they have historic and cultural ties to the land. These groups of people become anxious about their political power when newer groups enter into the country. Sons of soil groups are reluctant to accept new influxes of immigrants, especially when new groups show their ability to compete for power in the form of elections (Walter, 2022, p. 66-69).

For example, the people of Assam, a region in Northeast India, opposed the immigration of Bengalis because the Assamese worried that they would lose their control over the government if the Bengalese became a majority. The Assamese resistance group instilled fear in others, claiming that immigration was taking away their livelihoods and they need to fight

for their cultural survival. However, the proportion of Bengalis continued to increase, and the Assamese became more desperate: on February 18, 1983, Assamese farmers massacred around four thousand Bengali immigrants. “The Nellie Massacre, as it came to be called, was the desperate act of a downgraded population, one that felt threatened by a new demographic reality” (Walter, 2022, p. 69-74).

Finally, the spark that launches countries into civil war is frequently the loss of hope. When citizens see that traditional methods of negotiation no longer work, they resort to violence. “Citizens can absorb a lot of pain. What they can’t take is the loss of hope. It’s when a group looks into the future and sees nothing but additional pain that they start to see violence as their only path to progress” (Walter, 2022, p. 84). Citizens can lose hope after a failed protest, since protestors are fundamentally hopeful that the government will heed their words. If the government enacts no change, citizens realize that they must use violence (Walter, 2022, p. 89-92). In addition to protests, elections can provide information about how well a party can compete for power. If a group loses consistently, it will become convinced that it must use methods outside of elections to take power. This is in fact what happens in the American Civil War, where Southern Democrats lost hope after the victory of Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 election. They believed that the only way they could protect their economic interests based on slavery was to secede (Walter, 2022, p. 92-96).

The uniqueness of Walter’s argument is its focus on civil conflicts, and we must clarify whether civil conflicts are exactly analogous to decline. Civil wars are warning signs of a serious flaw in government institutions and remind people of the fragility of governmental systems, since they represent instances where internal conflicts cannot be resolved through peaceful, political means. For example, the English Civil War is a conflict between the Royalists and the Parliamentarians over the rights of the absolutist facet of the British government (the monarchy) versus the rights of the democratic facet of the British government (Parliament). This civil war represents a moment when the issue at hand cannot be solved through conventional legislative processes. It exposed the underlying problem with how the government is fundamentally organized. Therefore, civil wars can be indicators of an issue with society that has laid

dormant, but now finally burst out in a violent rupture. This is the connection between civil conflicts and civilizational decline. Walter’s investigation of civil wars is ultimately useful and related to the central topic because civil wars can foreshadow the future trajectory of a country’s prosperity.

Synthesis of Arguments/Conclusion

Now that we have thoroughly analyzed the arguments of each other, we will investigate how these works interact with each other. Since *Why Nations Fail* and *Collapse* closely resemble each other in terms of their ultimate goals, we will start by comparing the arguments of those two books.

Why Nations Fail argues that whether or not a government encourages innovation determines whether a country is poor or rich. *Collapse* posits that a country’s success is based on the environmental conditions and how well society adapts to these conditions. These arguments may seem completely antagonistic on the surface, since one emphasizes the internal structures of society as the determining factor while the other emphasizes the external forces of nature.

However, if we investigate the evidence that each author uses, we discover that these arguments complement each other, instead of negating each other. Firstly, Acemoglu and Robinson frame the Industrial Revolution as the major pivot point or “critical juncture” for when countries began to diverge from each other, but based on their theory alone, we cannot explain any inequality between civilizations before industrialization. During that era, Diamond’s geographical hypothesis remains more effective at describing the discrepancies between countries. These two theories apply to two different time periods, so only by holding these two arguments in conjunction can we gain a more comprehensive insight of the truth of the past.

Now, we revisit the original research question: is the United States in decline? If we consider all of the three arguments, we find that the United States satisfies many of the criteria. When we consider a country’s extractiveness/inclusiveness as in *Why Nations Fail*, we can look to wealth inequality as a measure of how much the top is exploiting the innovations of the bottom. Based on data from the Federal Reserve Bank about the wealth distribution

in the United States, the top 10% possess 68% of the wealth in all households as of the third quarter of 2022 (Distribution of Household, n.d.). For *Collapse*, we examine the amount of air pollution and the country's dependence on fossil fuels to investigate how much the United States is using/abusing the environment. In 2021, the United States emitted 5.01 billion tons in carbon dioxide (Annual CO₂, n.d.), and it remains one of the most significant contributors to greenhouse gas emissions (Annual Greenhouse, n.d.). Barbara F. Walter provides her own analysis of the United States' situation in relation to her book, and she observes that the United States has drifted into the dangerous anocracy zone during the presidency of Donald Trump (Walter, 2022, p. 135-138). She argues that the United States has become more and more factionalized based on ethnicity and religion; whether a state votes red or blue depends more on ethnicity and religion than ideology (Walter, 2022, p. 141-143). Former president Trump has appealed to white voters' identity as the rightful owners of American soil and exploited their fear of rising immigrant populations (Walter, 2022, p. 148-151).

All of these signs indicate a possible downward trend in United States prosperity as it turns into a more extractive, divided, and polluted society. However, none of these variables present a deterministic fate for American society. Although the United States still relies on fossil fuels as a major energy source, it is possible that the government may pass legislation to facilitate a transition to renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and hydroelectricity. Although the democratic guardrails of the country were severely tested in recent years, responsible government leaders held firm and the commitment to a democracy withstood autocratic tendencies. Although the United States suffers from wealth inequality, it is possible that the country's innovative nature will continue to motivate young talents to rise in the social ladder despite unfair opportunities.

Ultimately, there is reason to worry, but there is also reason to hope. Constructive action and self-improvement come from the stimulus of an issue combined with the hope of a brighter future. When we see a problem, we are motivated to fix it. When we have hope for the future, we are motivated to work towards making it a reality. Without one or the other, motivation would be much harder. These books provide readers with both aspects, so in this sense,

they are valuable as rich treasure troves of history and motivators of change.

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