Why do civilisations collapse? Is our civilisation in danger?

When we consider the semantic meaning attached to the word 'collapse'…we consider it representing something that falls down or gives way. A collapsing economy, a collapsing structure or even a person (singular) collapsing would all be in our accepted and perhaps daily articulation of events without much rumination. However, for something as monumental as the potential collapse of an entire civilisation, the definition of 'collapse' becomes almost too meagre for the resulting chaos which would ensue if an entire civilisation were to fall away.

A civilisation is a society, culture and way of life of a particular area during a specific period of time. Do civilisations actually collapse? Or would it be better to ask if they more fittingly 'self-destruct'? Do they come with a sell by date and a 'shelf life'[1], or do they simply self-implode as a result of complex systems such as internal, external and environmental change which underpin them? Thereby allowing this Jenga Block[2] of a structure first to teeter precariously, then to come tumbling down.

Critically, unlike ancient civilisations, modern civilisations exist in a globally hyperconnected manner. A single state growing weak and terminating would not affect the world disastrously, but instability of a global superpower could trigger a domino effect across continents. As Metternich so succinctly remarked "when America sneezes the whole world catches a cold"[3] Modern examples include the global financial crisis of 2008 or the Covid pandemic of 2019 where Jenga blocks of civilisation rallied against an instability financially and socially, the likes of which have taken years to even begin to recover. Environmentally, we fight the changes of our climate but rather than being proactive- we have become reactive. Bringing the decline and tumbling of our deeply interconnected Jenga-esque ecosystems crashing. Once able to buffer small shocks such as the deterioration of the seasonal climate system, our civilisation now has reached a critical point of concern.

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[1] Kemp, L. (2024). *Why societies grow more fragile and vulnerable to collapse as time passes*. www.bbc.com. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240424-do-societies-civilisations-grow-old-frail-and-vulnerable-to-collapse.

[2] Jenga is a game manufactured by Hasbro. The name comes from the Swahili word "kujenga" which means 'to build' or 'construct'

[3] Klemens Wenzel Furst Von Metternich – Prussian Diplomat. www.theculturetrip.com

Further, a report published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2022 found the average duration of civilisations in their critical point database to be approximately 201 years. What is our shelf life? Have we past our sell by date?

Perhaps the best way to understand why civilisations collapse is to first examine the differing systems which provide the foundation for any civilisation to exist. It can be viewed that John Locke's political theory (1689) concerning civilisation collapse tends towards internal pressure from its citizens. In his 'Two Treaties of Government'[4] Locke theorised that the rise of any civilisation was brought about by the fact that individuals would be under constant threat of physical harm. And they would be 'unable to pursue any goals that required stability and widespread cooperation with other humans.'[5] Locke asserts that government arose in this context. Individuals, seeking the benefits which could be gained, decided to relinquish some of their rights to a central authority while retaining other rights. This took the form of a contract. 'In agreement for relinquishing certain rights, individuals would receive protection from physical harm, security for their possessions, and the ability to interact and cooperate with other humans in a stable environment.'[5] He advocated that governments must therefore have the consent of the people. So according to this view, any government that rules without the consent of the people can, in theory, be overthrown and collapse. This was illustrated on 21st January 1793 when Louis XVI died at the guillotine. This marked the end of the Ancien Régime, a society characterised by its stark social inequality. 'The country was heavily in debt due to its involvement in the American War of Independence and the Seven Years' War.'[6] The taxation system was also highly inefficient and unjust, placing a disproportionate burden on the poorer sections of society while the nobility and clergy were largely exempt. This was accompanied by several years of poor harvests, cattle disease, droughts and soaring food prices which led to widespread desperation and resentment among the poor towards a regime that imposed heavy taxes, yet failed to provide any relief. The Ancien Régime was contrary to Locke's theory. The rich

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[4] Locke, J. (1823). *Two Treatises of Government*. Available at: https://www.yorku.ca/comninel/courses/3025pdf/Locke.pdf.
[5] *Locke, John | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [online] Available at: https://iep.utm.edu/locke/#SH4a.
[6] *What factors led to the crisis of the Ancien Régime? | TutorChase*. [online] Available at: https://www.tutorchase.com/answers/ib/history/what-factors-led-to-the-crisis-of-the-ancien-r-gime#

and powerful were no longer supporting the 'Third Estate'[7], thus according to Locke were right to overthrow their government. Such examples include the formation of the National Assembly to the Oath of the Tennis Court, the abolition of 'Feudalism'[8], the storming of the Bastille[9] and the execution of their ruler. It can be seen that the fall of monumental architecture, art and monasteries such as the 'Saint-Martin-des-Champs Priory'[10] or the disruption of the division of labour or dissolution of social and economic classes by definition suggest that this was a complete collapse of the Ancien Régime civilisation. Hence it is evident that the 'why' of the 'collapse' of this civilisation was due to a governmental wrongdoing.

Along with institutional failure, population dynamics become the supporting blocks in the Jenga base of this framework of a civilised society and are perhaps the most pervasive forces of internal change. Whether it be a population shift, growth or decline that has caused the collapse throughout the centuries. Population shifts were the driving forces behind the collapse of the Maya civilisation[11], which had thrived in Mesoamerica for more than a thousand years. The "Classic Maya" collapse happened swiftly in the 800s. 'Diseases such as dysentery and lethal hemorrhagic fevers killed and disabled thousands of Mayans. Millions more were forced to relocate from cities to more rural areas.'[12] Such huge population shifts reduced the ability of the Mayan people to communicate, administrate, trade and unite against outside threats and natural disasters. Perhaps these factors

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[7] Before the revolution, French society was divided into three order: the First Estate (clergy), the Second Estate (nobility) and the Third Estate (everyone else from peasant farmers to the bourgeoisie)

[8] Feudalism – 'A combination of legal, economic, military, cultural, and political customs that flourished in medieval Europe from the 9th to 15th centuries. Broadly defined, it was a way of structuring society around relationships derived from the holding of land in exchange for service or labour.' Wikipedia, The Free Encylcopedia

[9] The storming of the Bastille - signaled the first victory of the people of Paris against a symbol of the 'Old Regime'.

[10] The Priory of Saint-Martin-des-Champs was an influential monastery established in what is now the city of Paris, France. Its surviving buildings are considered treasures of Medieval architecture in the city.

Wikipedia. (2022). *Saint-Martin-des-Champs Priory*. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint-Martin-des-Champs_Priory [Accessed 3 Jul. 2024].

[11] The Maya civilization was a Mesoamerican civilization that existed from antiquity to the early modern period. It is known by its ancient temples and glyphs. The Maya script is the most sophisticated and highly developed writing system in the pre-Columbian Americas.

[12] education.nationalgeographic.org. (n.d.). *Key Components of Civilization*. [online] Available at: https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/key-components-civilization/#.

alongside a falling away of societal glue, contributed to the internal and therefore external collapse of the Maya civilisation.

The External pressure on civilisations of yesteryear have presented themselves in many differing forms from foreign warfare to conflict over borders, to religious influences. Exemplified by the eradication of polytheistic religion in Ancient Egypt. In all of these cases whilst certain factors might have contributed to transformations for the good, in most the extraneous circumstances have caused a weakening and collapse of once thriving civilisations. Ancient Egypt, the once great empire on the Nile, provides a compelling case study of how external pressures can cause the collapse of a civilisation over centuries. Egypt faced prolonged, intermittent conflicts with neighbouring civilisations like the Nubians to the south, the Assyrians in the Middle East, and the Libyans to the west. Additionally, 'Egypt encountered the civilisations of Ancient Greece and Rome, eventually becoming part of the Roman Empire'[13] in 30BC with the defeat of the Pharaoh Cleopatra VII by Emperor Augustus. Apart from armed conflicts, Egypt also experienced significant external pressures from cultural and religious shifts. With the influential introduction of Islam and Christianity into their society, this eradicated both hieroglyphics and the polytheistic religion prevalent at the time. Thus, it can be seen that many of the factors that triggered the collapse of the Ancient Egyptian civilisation were external factors. Hence, the 'why' of civilisation collapse must be influenced by a fusion of both internal and extraneous factors.

Very rapidly after 24th August AD 79, judging by the available evidence, Pompeii disappeared completely from the face of the inhabited world. 'It was hot, unnaturally hot for a summer's dawn. A violent tremor shook the burning air, followed by a clap of thunder. The people of Pompeii watched, horrified, as Mount Vesuvius burst open before their very eyes. White-hot stones hailed down upon the town. Then came the ash, blinding them, choking their mouth and lungs. Some took cover in the farthest corners of their homes; others tried to escape, fleeing with their families towards the nearby sea. But very few would get that far…'[14]. This illustrates that the death of the city meant not only the complete destruction of its streets, monuments and houses, but also the devastating death of the inhabitants, struck

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[13] education.nationalgeographic.org. (n.d.). *Key Components of Civilization*. [online] Available at: https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/key-components-civilization/#.
[14] 'Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum' written by Paul Roberts

down in the midst of their everyday activities; their contorted forms would be faithfully preserved by the volcanic ash expelled out by Vesuvius. While many anthropologists think that both natural disasters and misuse of the environment were cataclysmic in the collapse of many historic civilisations namely: volcanoes, droughts, tsunamis, avalanches, earthquakes, landslides or wildfires. Less is understood as to whether the current trends portend a collapse of our own civilisation. Climate disruption may pose insurmountable biophysical barriers to increasing crop yields. In what King Charles described as 'an act of suicide on a grand scale' facing what the UK's Chief Scientific Advisor John Beddington called a 'perfect storm' of environmental problems. Climate disruption could risk a collapse of our civilisation: 'an accelerating extinction of animal and plant populations and species, which could lead to a loss of ecosystem services essential for human survival; land degradation and land-use change; a pole-to-pole spread of toxic compounds; ocean acidification and eutrophication; worsening of some aspects of the epidemiological environment; depletion of increasingly scarce resources, including especially groundwater, which is being overexploited in many key agricultural areas; and resource wars.'[15] If environmental factors were indeed significant in the collapse of past civilisations, will they too be a key influence in the downfall of our own civilisation?

In the realm of technological systems, the concept of "normal accidents" proposes that failures are an inherent aspect of complexity. This notion extends beyond mere machinery to encompass civilisations themselves, suggesting that collapse may be an intrinsic occurrence irrespective of a society's size or developmental stage. Despite our contemporary technological prowess, it would be misguided to assume immunity from the perils that befell our forebears. In fact, our current technological capabilities introduce novel challenges like heightened energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and the disposal of electronic waste, underscoring the intricate web of issues we face.

The spectre of collapse looms not just over vast empires but also over nascent kingdoms, challenging the notion that sheer magnitude offers protection against societal unravelling.

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[15] Ehrlich, P.R. and Ehrlich, A.H. (2013). Can a collapse of global civilization be avoided? *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 280(1754), p.20122845. doi:https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2012.2845.

Our interconnected global economy, intricately interwoven as it is, serves as a conduit for crises to propagate swiftly and widely.

On a brighter note, there are grounds for optimism stemming from our capacity to innovate and pivot away from catastrophe, as evidenced by advancements in hydrogen power, nuclear fusion, Artificial Intelligence, and the fabrication of 3D printed coral reefs. Nevertheless, the current trajectory of the world echoes the patterns that have precipitated the downfall of previous civilisations. Climate shifts, escalating wealth disparities, escalating global complexity, and the unsustainable strain we place on the environment collectively paint a troubling picture.

If previous civilisations have collapsed does this suggest that the same threat might be apparent for our civilisation? Not necessarily.

Judgement of previous collapses have been based on the existential failures within the systems which once supported that specific civilisation. As the passing of time allows for a progression within these Jenga-esque structures perhaps it could be argued that our foundations are now stronger.

It is hard to compare the rudimentary historical features which underpinned ancient structures of society with those which rely heavily on the progression of technology, and of time. Other than the fact that civilisations, both historical and present day are constructed by humans, little else remains similar. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to predict the trajectory of new and exciting developments in Artificial Intelligence. Those living in Ancient Egypt and more relevantly those living in our own civilisation still realise the threat of external pressures, from the 'Invasion of the sea people' [16] to today's warring cultural and religious divides we face uncertain futures.

In the global Jenga construction of civilisations both past and present, perhaps the only surety is the uncertainty of whether Jenga pieces will come tumbling down.

16