

# The collapse theory collapses

a book review by Nicolas Journet in the journal 'Sciences humaines'  
[\[www.scienceshumaines.com\]](http://www.scienceshumaines.com)

## RESUME

Overwhelmed by theories on the imminent collapse of the western civilization, it would be interesting to adopt an historic perspective questioning the theories on the collapse of past civilizations. Nicolas Journet article in 'Sciences humaines' magazine comments on the book '**Questioning Collapse. Human resilience, ecological vulnerability and the aftermath of empire**' by Patricia A. Mc Anany et Norman Yoffee (dir.), Cambridge University Press, 2010, 374 p.

Reference:

[https://www.scienceshumaines.com/la-theorie-de-l-effondrement-s-effondre\\_fr\\_24958.html](https://www.scienceshumaines.com/la-theorie-de-l-effondrement-s-effondre_fr_24958.html)

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## TEXTE

"Collapse: radical and lasting decline in the number, the economic and social political organization of a population over a large territory." It's in these terms that Jared Diamond, author of the bestseller of the same name, defined in 2005 the consequence of the relentlessness of human societies, growing and multiplying, destroying their environment to the point of making their lives unbearable. The lesson –needless to say– is worth warning for today's challenges, however the most famous examples analyzed by J. Diamond were taken in a distant and often exotic past: the Easter island (Rapa Nui) ravaged by its own inhabitants, the Yucatan gnawed by the Mayan farmers, the New Mexico desert overexploited by the Pueblo Indians, the colonies of Greenland, badly inhabited and quickly abandoned by the Vikings. All of them, having made the wrong choices, destroyed their environment, and died ...

### Rejecting Jared Diamond's theses

'Questioning Collapse' is a refutation of J. Diamond's theory by a group of anthropologists and archaeologists horrified by the selective catastrophism of the Los Angeles biologist. No, say Carl Lipo and Terry Hunt, the Pascuane society, despite the deforestation, has not experienced any decline before the arrival of whites (around 1780). No, the Mayas were not suicidal farmers: they changed their activity (Patricia McAnany), moved in the ninth century, and are 7 million today. The Vikings, they held five hundred years in Greenland before finding a better way of living elsewhere (Joel Berglund). Where was the mistake? Too hasty, too eager to support her thesis, J. Diamond sees "collapses" where there are none.

That is the thesis supported by these specialists, who first call for a more thorough knowledge of history. But beyond that, it's the whole focus of J. Diamond's work, its background, and its implications that they obviously refute. The very concept of collapse, as defined by J. Diamond, is unacceptable because it accuses environmental blindness of the vanished civilizations, but exonerates colonization by the West, in the name of the fact that the Americas and the Australia is actually more

populated than before. Yes, but by whom? J. Diamond challenges China's development today. Yes but why? That's it to avoid challenging the development of the richest countries.

Responsible for spreading selective and unilateral theses, J. Diamond is suspected of promoting a contemptuous claim for the losers of history, which certainly warns Western civilization against the risk of self-destruction, but praises its success and, in the end, renews our confidence.

### **In memory of Aboriginal peoples**

Indisputably, P. McAnany, Norman Yoffee and others do not agree with this view: for them, the risk of environmental disaster is a brand new reality, precisely related to our civilization that has - more than J. Diamond said - precipitated the destruction of others.

By reading this book, we appreciate the ability of Anglo-Saxon researchers to point the real question. Because, even if the debate raised in 'Questioning Collapse' is highly scientific, we are a little surprised to see that it equally raises the question of the respect due to the memory of the indigenous peoples of America and elsewhere, a question which is avoided by other authors.