



Research Paper

The Internal Erosion of Civilization: Ignorance, Change, and Polarization as Catalysts of Collapse

Abstract

This paper critically examines the internal vulnerabilities that threaten the stability and longevity of modern civilization, focusing specifically on the rise of ignorance, the unintended consequences of societal change, and the intensification of ideological polarization. Drawing upon historical and contemporary sources, the analysis reveals how these phenomena—each rooted in the actions and beliefs of individuals within the society—have the capacity to erode democratic structures, undermine public trust, and accelerate social fragmentation. The work argues that despite economic progress and technological advancement, modern civilizations are susceptible to collapse from within if these issues remain unaddressed. Through interdisciplinary references, from psychological theory to sociopolitical analysis, the paper illuminates the paradox of prosperity fostering complacency and division, thereby advancing the argument that meaningful reform must begin with individual and collective intellectual responsibility.

Keywords

Civilization collapse; Cult of ignorance; Sociopolitical polarization; Complacency and prosperity; Democratic erosion; Intellectual responsibility

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I. Introduction

Civilization is commonly referred to as the point in human cultural development when writing and the keeping of written records are attained (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition of civilization contrasts sharply with the concept of *barbarism*, a word used to describe people or societies who are primitive or uncivilized compared to the standards of the prevailing civilization. The concept signifies the practice or display of barbarian acts, attitudes, or ideas (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Thus, “our civilization,” referred to in the prompt, does not indicate the human species as a whole but rather only specific geographic locations or temporal periods.

According to Luke Kemp, who holds a Ph.D. in International relations, “Collapse [of civilizations] can be defined as a rapid and enduring loss of population, identity[,] and socio-economic complexity. Public services crumble[,] and disorder ensues as government loses control of its monopoly on violence” (“Are we on the road...”). Interestingly, the reference to violence reflects a modicum of barbarism, thereby signifying a regression of civilization, given the diminished trust in established bureaucratic institutions.

Risk and danger are two similar terms with one significant distinction: Risk includes agency, and thus, by making a decision, a person intentionally risks facing consequences that could be harmful to themselves and others. Conversely, danger is simply a state of being and attributes little to no responsibility to the decision-maker.

When examining the health of a civilization to determine whether or not it is in danger of collapse, three questions must be answered: To what extent do its citizens enjoy an exceptionally high quality of living? Are political systems constantly in flux? Are platforms and public figures polarizing the masses? Our civilization is in a relative period of prosperity that incentivizes both positive and negative political changes that ironically increase the chance of our civilization fracturing due to deepening opposing ideologies, proving that we must be in danger of collapse.

The Cult of Ignorance

Thousands of years ago, everyday life in the earliest Egyptian civilizations was similar to today's, or was it? Artworks and recovered artifacts can be deceiving. The concept of perfection was deliberately highlighted in how Egyptians viewed their deaths; they were buried with their most beloved possessions and daily necessities to ensure a smooth journey to the afterlife. Despite these images of prosperity, Egyptians and other ancient peoples

dealt with chronic health issues, hard labor, and parasites in the virulent breeding ground of the Nile River. People mainly worked for basic needs to sustain themselves, not for acquisitions, "...[following] rhythms radically different from our own...[for] Egyptians had no weekends" (Brier and Hobbs, 84).

After learning about Egyptians' struggles, it is no wonder people seek to enjoy the privilege of having time in today's civilizations – at least a higher percentage of societies. Outliers are inevitable because capitalism and other widely adopted economic systems encourage the development of social structures. Opportunities are limited, and greater opportunities exist for those at the top of the social structures. Time away from the toils of a job means time to relax and do as one pleases. Furthermore, modern innovations have caused the global GDP to soar, lowered poverty rates, and extended the average human lifespan from around twenty in the 1700s to around seventy in the 21st century (Beauchamp).

The result is that the human population has grown complacent, especially the middle and upper classes. In addition, during recent "well-fed years," the value of education has diminished while ignorance and laziness have flourished. A meta-analysis comparing the results of twenty-two studies published in *Psychological Bulletin* finds that forty percent of people willfully choose to be ignorant, specifically when someone deliberately shuns information regarding the adverse outcomes of their actions.

As the value of education diminishes, we often see a phenomenon in which overconfidence grows among those without the value of an education; unfortunately, disdain for people with higher academic learning leads to uninformed decisions, a development known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, named after psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. In a poll by *The Washington Post*, a broad range of participants were asked whether or not the United States should aid Ukraine with military intervention after the Russian invasion. What's concerning is that those most vocal about using military force to limit the advance of Putin were those who didn't know Ukraine's location on a map. This poll result shows why ignorance is so dangerous: because by aiding Ukraine, the US would increase tensions with Russia, which could lead to instability for millions of Americans and another world war. Fundamental facts are founded on informed opinions, no matter how trivial they seem.

Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. The fast food industry and factory floors have, as of 2023, a turnover rate of over a hundred fifty percent (Lindner). Employees constantly complain about poor or nonexistent insurance benefits, demanding customers, and no long-term career-scaling opportunities. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there isn't a single state in the country where people making the minimum wage can afford to rent a one-bedroom apartment at fair market prices while working full time. The percentage of people who believe that rich people achieved their singular success due to advantages early on has grown significantly, from forty-two to sixty-five percent.

Regarding jobs, one's skills are tied directly to one's wage. Starting salaries for neurosurgeons are, on average, around three hundred sixty thousand in the United States. It is a strenuous career path: over 66 percent of neurosurgeons experience burnout. Burnout has three main principles: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Fast food prep and factory work is very repetitive, and a more significant portion of people can perform these tasks, meaning more people are relegated to lower-paying jobs just to have income.

A famous saying by investor and philanthropist Charles Munger is, "To the man with a hammer, the world looks like a nail." It's a figurative way of conveying the widely observed cognitive bias that people tend to approach problems with solutions that align with their biases and beliefs. As a result, individuals within a "cult of ignorance" will naturally surround themselves with people with similar ways of thinking, forming a world that indeed looks like a "nail," breeding extremism. People at the bottom of society will undoubtedly be most attracted to these cults because "Receptive people are those who are looking to escape something—such as an unhappy life situation—and to belong, be accepted, and find meaning" (The Psychology of Cults).

Essentially, cults of ignorance undermine democracy. They are built on lies, yet people given power in a democratic society are expected to be fully transparent. In any society, regular citizens are actually the ones with power. People like to think politicians have all the power, but their supporters bestowed it upon them. Even in societies that are designed to stifle the public ability to challenge the exchange of power, acts of passive resistance, A big enough group of people, through collective action, could destabilize a government's control. Mike Keppler wisely said, "Once the thunderstorm starts, raindrops can no longer vote." Once the army of a society is overwhelmed by a group of ordinary citizens, the collapse of a society will be inevitable. Even with the raindrops, in this case, the minority with the consolidated power, the movement has already reached the breaking point. The point of no return.

Change

Change is often seen as something good within society. Only with change can the problematic laws and behaviors be reduced and removed. If one assumes a society is perfect, which is no such thing, wouldn't change be unnecessary? Wouldn't change introduce the possibility of a new harmful impact on the system's stability?

Polarization

Freedom of speech is a right recognized by the European Union and the United Nations, and it is a fundamental part of enlightened society to avoid the oppression of ideas and to allow for thoughtful debates and discussions. Ironically, freedom of speech also contributes to polarization, allowing people with extreme ideas to broadcast them to billions. Freedom of speech doesn't work because it assumes that those who listen can filter out the detrimental information. In the US, where there is freedom of speech, there are still banned phrases such as "I want to kill the president." Hate speech is still banned if it threatens or incites criminal activities. The American Civil Liberties Union, or the ACLU, fights for looser free speech laws. On their website, they believe that the current free speech system is too strict and that the speaker's true intent must be examined before considering something to be an actual threat. An example that they used was if someone said, "Let's burn this motherfucker's house down," if the speaker were just trying to express their outrage, it wouldn't be considered a real threat even if the actual phrase were a threat.

It is apparent immediately to most that this is questionable at best, and both sides of the argument have flaws. If both options have negative consequences, then is one better than the other? Brian Leiter, a political philosopher at the University of Chicago, put it nicely: "We're all conditioned by our environment, and what we want and think are really just products of social, economic, and psychological forces beyond our control." Contrary to the goal of the ACLU, he believes there are downsides to free speech, but he doesn't want to regulate free speech either since he thinks it's impossible.

On social media, it is acceptable and even encouraged to hate the privileged or anyone doing better than the average person, polarizing us more and more without even realizing it because of the broad audience we have access to.

II. Conclusion

Will & Ariel Durant once wisely said, "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within." All three factors—ignorance, change, and polarization—are ultimately only influential when they come from the people living inside the civilization; thus, external forces are insufficient. Hopefully, our collective civilization will be able to realize this before it's too late and strive to truly understand how people can better control their minds and actions, thereby leading to substantial positive social impacts.

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