

Understanding Collapse

When strong states within a society fall, the impact on society as a whole is great. The population of these states drops and density decreases dramatically. Society as a whole tends to become less politically centralized, and state sponsored support of elements such as architecture, art, and literature declines. Trade and other economic activities are greatly diminished, and the flow of information among people slows. The ruling elites may change, but usually the working classes tend to remain and provide continuity (though in some cases, virtually no one remains).

Is it possible to prevent a collapse?

Sociologist Melvin H. Tumin and anthropologist John W. Bennett have highlighted "prerequisites for survival," needs that must be met in order for a society to continue:

- Every society must be able to answer the basic biological needs of its members: food, drink, shelter, and medical care.
- Every society must provide for the production and distribution of goods and services (perhaps through a division of labor, rules concerning property and trade, or ideas about the role of work).
- Every society must provide for the reproduction of new members and consider laws and issues related to reproduction (regulation, marriageable age, number of children, and so on).
- Every society must provide for the training (education, apprenticeship, passing on of values) of an individual so that he or she can become a functioning adult in the society.
- Every society must provide for the maintenance of internal and external order (laws, courts, police, wars, diplomacy).
- Every society must provide meaning and motivation to its members.

This last prerequisite is more important than it may seem. No societal activity is possible unless people are motivated to participate. Why do we get up in the morning? How do we see ourselves in relation to other members of society? Why do we follow a society's rules? Without a sense of meaning and motivation, people will become apathetic. If this happens, a society may be threatened with decline.