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The Inevitability of Collapse

What the World's First Globalized Economy And Its Destruction Tell Us About Our Future

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TLDR: In 1200 BC, the entire Bronze Age world collapsed — not because of earthquakes, invasions, or climate change, but because its elite class grew too large, extracted too much, and left every society so hollowed out that any shock could shatter it. The same pattern has repeated in every fallen civilization since. It cannot be prevented. And it might be the only reason progress happens at all.

"The fall of empire, the demise of whole societies — these are not accidents. They are appointments." — Chris Hedges

Sometime around 1200 BC, give or take a few decades that nobody alive can be bothered to pin down with any precision, the known world caught fire. Not in the poetic sense. In the literal, archaeological sense — palaces reduced to carbon, trade networks severed like arteries, entire populations vanishing into the indifferent dust of the eastern Mediterranean.

Scholars, with their infinite talent for naming catastrophes in the driest possible language, call this the *Bronze Age Collapse*. It is one of the great unsolved murders of human civilization: a thriving, interconnected, shockingly sophisticated global order snuffed out in what amounts to an eyeblink of historical time. And the reason nobody can agree on who killed it is because the answer is too ugly, too familiar, and too inconvenient for a species that has spent the subsequent three thousand years doing the exact same thing over and over again with depressing enthusiasm.

But let us set the scene, because you cannot appreciate the scale of the catastrophe without first appreciating the scale of what was lost.

Picture the world as it existed in 1200 BC. At its center — geographically, economically, and in every way that mattered to the people who lived and died there — sat Mycenaean Greece, that collection of fortified warrior-palaces perched on the western edge of the Aegean Sea. Across from it, separated by a shimmering, treacherous stretch of water, lay Anatolia — what we now, with our genius for geopolitical rebranding, call Turkey.

Anatolia was the seat of the Hittite Empire, a military and diplomatic powerhouse that most people today couldn't identify in a lineup if their mortgage depended on it, which is a shame, because the Hittites were running one of the most formidable state apparatuses on the planet while your ancestors were probably chewing on bark somewhere in a forest.

South of Anatolia, hugging the coastline of the eastern Mediterranean, was a place called Canaan — a name that should ring a bell if you have ever cracked open a Bible or sat through a particularly tedious Sunday school lesson, because Canaan is the birthplace of the Israelites. Today it is the territory we carve up and call Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, which tells you everything you need to know about how much progress the region has made in

the intervening millennia.

Canaan, in 1200 BC, was a province of the Egyptian Empire, because of course it was — Egypt had its fingers in everything, the way empires do when they have enough grain to feed half the known world and enough soldiers to remind the other half who was in charge.

Further east lay Mesopotamia — modern Iraq — the cradle of civilization and the graveyard of approximately every foreign policy adventure attempted there since. Beyond that, Persia — Iran — and then Afghanistan, and then India, stretching the trade routes to a length that would make a modern logistics executive weep into his spreadsheet. To the west, across the Mediterranean, the islands of Cyprus and Crete floated like copper-rich jewels in the sea. Further still: Iberia, and then, at the cold, rain-soaked edge of the world, Britain — a place that even in 1200 BC was mostly notable for having tin, bad weather, and not much else.

This was the Bronze Age world. And the critical thing to understand about it is that it was, by any reasonable definition of the term, globalized. These were not isolated pockets of humanity grunting at each other across impassable distances. They were trading. They were communicating. They were writing letters to each other — we have the diplomatic correspondence to prove it, scratched into clay tablets in a language called Akkadian, the English of its day, the lingua franca of international bullying and flattery. This was a world knit together by commerce, and the thread that held the whole tapestry together was bronze.

Bronze. An alloy of copper and tin. That is all it was — two metals melted together — and yet it was the petroleum of the ancient world, the silicon, the rare earth mineral, the everything. Bronze was weapons. Bronze was tools. Bronze was the economy itself, the material foundation upon which every palace and every empire and every petty chieftain's ambitions rested. And here is the part that makes the whole arrangement both miraculous and fatally stupid: copper and tin do not occur in the same places. Tin was found in Britain, in Iberia, in Anatolia, in Afghanistan — scattered across the earth as if some malicious deity had deliberately ensured that no single civilization could be self-sufficient. Copper came mainly from Cyprus and Crete and parts of Anatolia. Which meant that to make bronze — to make the one thing your entire economy depended on — you had to trade with half the planet. You had no choice. You were locked into a system of mutual dependence whether you liked it or not, and the moment any link in that chain broke, the whole thing was liable to come apart like a cheap necklace.

There were, broadly speaking, four ways to make money in this world. The first was mining — digging copper and tin out of the earth, the original extractive industry, performed then as now by people who had no realistic alternative. The second was manufacturing — smelting the metals, alloying them, and turning the resulting bronze into weapons, tools, pottery, and anything else that could be sold at a markup. The third was trade, and this is where the geography becomes deliciously ruthless, because if you happened to control the spot through which all trade had to pass, you could sit there collecting tolls like a glorified highway bandit with a crown.

That spot, the chokepoint of the ancient world, the logistics hub through which every caravan and every ship had to navigate, was a place called Troy. Troy — yes, that Troy, the one with the horse and the Helen and the whole sordid, blood-soaked epic that Homer would later immortalize. For centuries, wars were fought over Troy, not because of any woman's face, however lovely, but because controlling Troy meant controlling the flow of wealth across the known world. If you held Troy, everyone paid you. It was the toll gate of civilization.

The Greeks who eventually sacked it were not, despite what the poets would have you believe, engaged in some noble rescue mission. They were pirates. Which brings us to the fourth way of making money in the Bronze Age: piracy. Theft. Raiding. The honest profession of taking what other people had earned, by force, because you had ships and swords and a flexible attitude toward property rights. When we read the Odyssey, when we swoon over the heroes of the Iliad, we are romanticizing a class of armed robbers who happened to speak Greek and whose descendants had the good fortune to produce some excellent literature about it.

So this was the world: interconnected, wealthy, dynamic, violent, and spectacularly unequal. Mycenaean Greece grew rich through trade and piracy. The Hittite Empire grew rich through territorial control and military muscle. Egypt grew rich because it was the breadbasket of the known world, the place where the grain was, and grain is the one commodity that never goes out of style. Canaan grew rich because it sat between all of them, skimming a percentage off every transaction like a well-positioned middleman. It was globalization avant la lettre — all the interdependence, all the inequality, all the fragility, wrapped in bronze and lashed together with the fraying ropes of diplomatic correspondence.

And then, in the space of a few decades, it all came crashing down.

Mycenaean Greece was destroyed. Not damaged, not diminished — destroyed, burned to the ground, its population reduced by roughly a quarter. The Hittite Empire, that colossus that had stood toe-to-toe with Egypt for centuries, simply ceased to exist. Canaan dissolved. And Egypt, though it survived the immediate onslaught, was so weakened that it would never again be a true power; within a few generations it was conquered by outside forces and relegated to the status of a historical monument, impressive to visit but no longer capable of frightening anyone.

After 1200 BC, the entire structure of Bronze Age civilization was gone. The trade networks collapsed. The diplomatic channels went silent. The clay tablets stopped being written. Darkness — actual, documentable, centuries-long darkness — descended over the eastern Mediterranean.

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For decades, scholars have been chewing on this mystery the way a dog chews on a bone that has long since lost its marrow. What happened? How does an entire interconnected civilization simply evaporate?

The Egyptian records — because the Egyptians, bless their obsessive bureaucratic hearts, wrote everything down — tell us about something they called the Sea Peoples. Over the course of several decades, waves of invaders came from the west, attacking by sea, assaulting Egypt with a persistence that suggests genuine desperation rather than mere opportunism. These were not a single nation or ethnic group. They were a motley coalition — pirates, displaced populations, refugees, the hungry and the armed — crashing against Egypt like surf against a seawall. Egypt managed to repulse them, but the Hittites did not. Mycenaean Greece did not. The Sea Peoples, whoever they were, rolled over the great civilizations of the Bronze Age like a tide over sandcastles.

But this only pushes the question back one step. What drove the Sea Peoples? What turned settled populations into desperate, seaborne marauders willing to attack the most powerful states on earth for a chance at survival?

They attacked Egypt because Egypt had food. These were hungry people — people whose crops had failed, whose cities had burned, whose social order had fractured beyond repair. They joined pirates because pirates had ships, and ships meant the possibility of reaching somewhere that still had grain. The Sea Peoples were not the cause of the Bronze Age Collapse. They were a symptom. They were the fever, not the disease.

The first serious theory proposed by scholars was invasion — that some unknown people from northern Europe swept down and smashed Mycenaean Greece, driving its inhabitants westward in a chain reaction of displacement and violence. It is a tidy theory. It is also, unfortunately, completely unsupported by evidence. There

is no archaeological trace of any such northern invasion. None. Zero. The theory persists in some textbooks the way outdated wallpaper persists in old houses — because nobody has bothered to strip it off.

The second theory was natural disaster — a volcanic eruption somewhere that altered the climate and triggered famine, which triggered migration, which triggered war. There is somewhat more evidence for this, but it remains insufficient to explain the totality of the collapse. A single eruption does not, by itself, erase multiple civilizations spread across thousands of miles.

The current scholarly consensus is what academics, with their flair for the undramatic, call a “perfect storm” or “systems collapse.” The idea is that no single event caused the catastrophe. Instead, a series of compounding disasters — earthquakes (for which there is solid archaeological evidence across the region), climate change (the weather grew cooler, making it harder to grow crops), and internal revolt (populations rebelling against their rulers) — combined over decades to overwhelm societies that were already stretched thin. Each blow weakened the system further, until the whole structure buckled and fell. It is, as theories go, pleasingly comprehensive. It is also, in the opinion of at least one dissenting voice, profoundly incomplete.

Because here is the thing about the Bronze Age Collapse that the “perfect storm” theory elegantly sidesteps: it was not unique. It was not some singular aberration in the otherwise orderly march of human progress. It was a pattern. The same pattern, in fact, that has repeated itself with nauseating regularity across every continent and every epoch of recorded history.

Consider the Maya. The Maya civilization, centered in what is now Guatemala and the surrounding regions of Central America, began its explosive growth around 200 AD. By 900 AD it had reached its zenith — sprawling city-states, monumental architecture, a written language, astronomical knowledge that would not be matched in Europe for centuries. And then, in the space of roughly three hundred years, it collapsed almost entirely. By 1200 AD, the great cities were being swallowed by jungle. The population had cratered. The written records stopped. The pattern is almost identical to the Bronze Age Collapse: a thriving, complex civilization hitting a peak and then plummeting into ruin. The dates are different. The geography is different. The specific catalysts are different. But the underlying dynamic — the structural rot that made collapse inevitable — is the same.

The traditional explanation for why societies collapse — the one most of us absorbed through some combination of school, popular history, and vague Marxist osmosis — goes something like this: the rich exploit the poor, the poor get angry, the poor revolt, the society collapses. It is a bottom-up model. The engine of destruction is the oppressed mass, pushed beyond endurance, rising up to tear down the structures of power. It is a satisfying narrative. It has the moral clarity of a fable. And… it is largely wrong.

When you actually look at the historical evidence — not the stories we tell about history, but the data, the archaeological record, the demographic curves, the economic indicators — the pattern that emerges is different. The disease is parasitic elite overpopulation — the relentless, inevitable proliferation of people who claim the right to extract wealth from everyone else without producing anything of value themselves.

Let us walk through this slowly, because it is worth understanding in its full, contemptible detail.

In the world of 1200 BC, you had something relatively new in human history: a permanent, hereditary elite. Before this period, elites existed — every human society has had people in charge — but they were not permanent in the way we mean it now. Leadership was fluid. Status was earned and could be lost. Privileges were not automatically transferred to one’s children like a genetic disorder.

But by the late Bronze Age, the parasitic elite had figured out how to make their position hereditary — how to pass their wealth, their status, and their power to their offspring regardless of whether those offspring had done a single useful thing in their pampered lives. This was the innovation that changed everything. Not the wheel. Not writing. Not irrigation. The real innovation was the permanent parasitic elite: the invention of a ruling class that could never be dislodged by merit alone.

Now, a permanent elite does provide certain advantages to a society, and intellectual honesty requires acknowledging them even while despising the arrangement. The first advantage is organization. An elite functions as a coordinating brain for society — it can marshal resources, direct labor, wage war, and build public works on a scale that egalitarian societies simply cannot match.

The pyramids of Egypt, the great irrigation systems of Mesopotamia, the fortified palaces of Mycenae — none of these were built by consensus. They were built by command, by elites who could organize thousands of people

toward a single purpose.

The second advantage is wealth. Hierarchical societies, for all their grotesque inequality, tend to be wealthier than egalitarian ones. Inequality, paradoxically, forces people to work harder — when there is a ladder, people climb.

The third advantage is scale. Egalitarian societies, the ones without permanent elites, tend to max out at roughly ten thousand people. Once you have a permanent elite coordinating resources, you can sustain populations of a million or more. Organization, wealth, and scale: the three gifts of hierarchy, purchased at the modest price of your freedom and dignity.

But here is where the arrangement turns poisonous, because the elite have a fatal flaw. They are, by nature and by incentive, rent-seekers.

Rent-seeking behavior. Remember this term. Tattoo it on your forearm if necessary, because it is the key that unlocks nearly every catastrophe in human history. Rent-seeking means extracting wealth not by creating anything, not by producing anything, not by contributing anything of value, but simply by controlling access to something that other people need.

A landlord does not grow crops. A landlord owns the land on which crops are grown, and charges the farmer for the privilege of using it. The landlord's entire income derives from the fact of ownership, not from any productive activity. This is rent-seeking in its purest form, and it is the primary business model of every parasitic elite class that has ever existed.

Consider a more modern example. Universities. You want to go to university. Why? Be honest with yourself for once in your life. You want the degree. The degree is your ticket — your entry pass into the professional class, your proof of membership in the guild of the educated. The university is charging you rent for that ticket.

The degree is the landlord's deed; you are the tenant. And here is the truly nauseating part: the university does not actually have to teach you very much, because you are going to pay the tuition regardless. You need the credential. You are captive. You will sit in the lecture hall and you will hand over your money and you will accept whatever quality of instruction is offered, because the alternative is exclusion from the economic opportunities that the degree unlocks.

The high school that prepares you for university is charging rent too — tuition for the privilege of accessing the next level of rent extraction. The entire educational apparatus, from kindergarten to graduate school, is a cascading series of tollbooths, each one collecting its fee before allowing you to proceed to the next. You are not paying to learn. You are paying for permission. And if that does not fill you with a species of cold, clarifying rage, then you have not been paying attention.

Now, rent-seeking on its own is parasitic but survivable, provided there exists something called a social contract. The social contract is the implicit bargain between the elite and the population: yes, we are charging you rent, and yes, this arrangement disproportionately benefits us, but in exchange, we will provide certain public goods — temples, feasts, irrigation, defense, the maintenance of order.

In the Bronze Age, the elite built the temples, organized the festivals, maintained the granaries. In our era, the government — which is merely the elite's administrative apparatus — builds parks, funds schools, maintains infrastructure. The social contract is what prevents the whole arrangement from collapsing into open revolt, because without it, people simply leave.

In the Bronze Age, if you were a farmer being crushed by the elite of one city-state, you could pack up and move to a different city-state. These polities were in competition with each other for population, because population meant labor and labor meant wealth. If your social contract was worse than your neighbor's, you would hemorrhage people until you had nobody left to exploit. It was, in its crude way, a market — a market in which the commodity being traded was human misery, and the sellers were shopping for the least miserable option available.

But over time — and this is the part where the story curdles — the system breaks down. It breaks down because rent-seeking behavior, left unchecked, produces two inevitable pathologies: debt and elite overpopulation.

Debt first. You are a farmer. You owe your landlord ten percent of your harvest as rent. One year, the rains do not come. Your crops fail. You have nothing to give. What do you do? You borrow. You promise to pay double next

year. The landlord agrees, because what choice does he have — he cannot extract rent from a corpse. But the next year is also bad. And the year after that. The debt compounds. Interest accumulates. Within a few years, the debt has grown to a size that no number of good harvests could ever repay. And when you cannot repay, you become property.

Debt slavery — the conversion of a free person into a bonded laborer through the mechanics of compound interest — is the natural, predictable, mathematically inevitable product of rent-seeking behavior. It has happened in every society that has ever tolerated the combination of private land ownership and interest-bearing debt. In the Bronze Age, it happened on a scale sufficient to destabilize entire civilizations. A growing percentage of the population, crushed under unpayable obligations, had nothing left to lose and everything to gain from burning the whole arrangement to the ground.

And then there is the other pathology: elite overpopulation itself. Everyone wants to be the landlord. Everyone wants to be the one collecting rent rather than paying it. But the amount of land — the amount of rent-extractable resource — is finite. As the elite class grows, as more and more people claim the right to extract wealth without producing it, competition among the elite intensifies. They begin fighting each other for the limited supply of rent-generating assets. The struggle for position becomes vicious, and eventually it becomes violent.

Civil war among the elite is not an aberration in human history. It is the default outcome of any society in which the number of people claiming elite status exceeds the number of elite positions available. The message of elite overpopulation theory is bleak and unequivocal: unless you can control the size of your elite class, your society will collapse. It must collapse, because the internal contradictions will tear it apart.

Historically, there have been three mechanisms for resolving the problem of too many elites, and every one of them is drenched in blood. The first is land redistribution — killing or dispossessing a portion of the elite and redistributing their assets to the population. This is, in essence, how kings came to power: one member of the elite seized control, cancelled the debts, redistributed the land, and in doing so purchased enough popular support to maintain authority. It is revolution dressed in a crown.

The second mechanism is civil war — the elite fight among themselves until only the strongest remain, and the losers are eliminated.

The third is empire building — rather than fighting over the existing pie, the elite agree to go conquer new territory, exporting their internal conflicts outward in the form of military expansion. Let us not fight each other, the logic goes. Let us go take someone else's land instead. It is the geopolitical equivalent of a family that cannot stop arguing deciding to renovate the kitchen: a displacement activity that solves nothing but temporarily redirects the aggression.

The problem, of course, is that all three solutions are themselves unstable. Land redistribution is revolution. Civil war is war. Empire building is also war. Each one generates its own instabilities, its own grievances, its own future crises. The cycle does not end. It cannot end. It is built into the structure of hierarchical society itself, as fundamental as the foundation of a building and just as impossible to remove without bringing the whole thing down.

Thomas Piketty, a French economist whose book Capital in the Twenty-First Century became the kind of doorstop bestseller that people buy to display on their coffee tables and never actually read, demonstrated the modern version of this dynamic with characteristically Gallic precision.

Over the past century, he showed, the financial economy has consistently grown faster than the real economy. Capital — money invested in financial instruments, real estate, stocks, the whole glittering casino of speculation — returns roughly five percent annually. The actual productive economy — factories, farms, businesses that make things — grows at roughly two percent.

The math is simple and the implications are devastating. If you have a million dollars, you do not open a factory. You put the money in the stock market, because the stock market pays better. Why would you endure the headaches of employing people, managing supply chains, and producing actual goods when you can simply sit on your assets and watch them multiply?

The rational choice, in a system where capital outpaces production, is to stop producing altogether and become a

pure rent-seeker. And when enough people make that rational choice, you get a society in which nobody is making anything anymore — a society in which all the wealth is being funneled into speculation, into financial instruments, into the elaborate fiction that money can breed more money without anyone having to do any actual work. It is a bubble. It is always a bubble. Because money, in the end, is not real. Capital is a consensual hallucination, a shared fiction maintained only so long as enough people agree to believe in it. The moment the fiction breaks — the moment the bubble pops — you discover that the entire edifice was built on nothing, and the collapse, when it comes, is total.

This is what happened in 1200 BC. The societies of the Bronze Age — Mycenaean Greece, the Hittite Empire, Egypt, Canaan — were not destroyed by earthquakes or climate change or mysterious invaders from the sea. Those were the proximate causes, the final straws, the gusts of wind that toppled structures already rotted from within. The fundamental cause was structural: these were societies hollowed out by rent-seeking behavior, destabilized by elite overpopulation, and rendered so brittle that any external shock — any earthquake, any drought, any wave of desperate refugees — was sufficient to shatter them.

Look at Mycenaean Greece specifically. The Mycenaeans and the Hittites were both direct descendants of the Yamnaya — the steppe warriors who swept across Europe and the Near East millennia earlier, establishing warrior cultures wherever they went.

Mycenaean Greece operated what scholars call a palace economy. The palace sat at the center of society like a great, hungry spider at the center of its web. Every farmer brought their harvest to the palace. Every artisan delivered their goods to the palace. The king then redistributed these resources — keeping, naturally, a generous cut for himself and his court. This was rent-seeking behavior elevated to a system of government.

It worked well enough in good years, when the harvests were plentiful and there was enough surplus to go around. But in bad years — when the weather turned, when the rains failed, when the crops withered — the elite did not tighten their belts. They did not share the suffering. They still demanded their cut. The taxes did not decrease. The rent did not decrease. The elite's appetite for extraction was constant regardless of the population's capacity to provide. The strain on ordinary people became unbearable.

And the archaeological record tells the rest of the story with brutal clarity: when we dig up Mycenaean sites, we find that the palaces were burned, but the surrounding houses were left intact. The destruction was targeted. The people did not burn their own homes. They burned the palaces. They burned the seats of power, the physical embodiments of the rent-seeking apparatus that had been grinding them into poverty for generations. We have the written records of the palace economy. We have the graves of the Mycenaean kings, and the goods buried with them grow more extravagant over time — gold, jewels, weapons of stunning craftsmanship — even as the broader society around them was sliding toward catastrophe. The kings grew richer. The people grew poorer. And then the people set the palaces on fire.

The same pattern played out, with local variations, across the entire Bronze Age world. The Hittites collapsed. Canaan dissolved. Egypt survived the immediate crisis but was so weakened that it ceased to matter as a geopolitical force. The Sea Peoples — those desperate, hungry, ship-borne coalitions of refugees and pirates — were a consequence of the collapse, not its cause. They were the people displaced by the disintegration, searching for food and safety in a world that had suddenly run out of both. They attacked Egypt because Egypt was the breadbasket, the last place that still had grain. They destroyed what they encountered along the way not because they were barbarians in any meaningful sense, but because they were starving, and starving people do not politely negotiate trade agreements.

The scholars who insist that the Bronze Age Collapse was a unique event, an unrepeatable catastrophe produced by a once-in-a-millennium convergence of misfortunes, are engaged in a form of intellectual cowardice that would be comical if it were not so consequential.

The collapse was not unique. It was not even unusual. It was the entirely predictable result of a social structure that generates its own destruction as surely as a fire generates its own heat. The Maya followed the same trajectory. The Roman Empire followed the same trajectory.

Every civilization that has ever organized itself around a permanent hereditary elite extracting rent from a captive population has eventually collapsed, because the internal dynamics of that arrangement — debt slavery at the bottom, elite overpopulation at the top — make collapse mathematically inevitable. The only variables are timing and trigger.

And here is the part that will make you want to pour yourself something strong: it cannot be avoided. The question was asked — can we avoid the cycle? Can we build a society that does not eventually destroy itself? — and the answer, delivered with the cheerful fatalism of someone who has thought about this far too long, is no. It is impossible.

Every attempt to build a permanent, stable society has failed and will continue to fail, because the very mechanisms that make a society powerful — hierarchy, organization, scale — are the same mechanisms that generate the rent-seeking behavior and parasitic elite that will eventually tear it apart. You cannot have the benefits of hierarchy without the costs. The pyramid cannot stand without a base, and the base will always, eventually, crumble under the weight of what is stacked on top of it.

But here — and this is the turn that redeems the whole blood-soaked narrative, if redemption is possible — collapse is not the end. Collapse is regeneration. The Bronze Age Collapse was a catastrophe for the people who lived through it, but it was also the precondition for everything that came after.

Because Mycenaean Greece collapsed, a new kind of Greek society emerged — the society that would produce Athens and Sparta and democracy and philosophy and tragedy and everything we lazily lump together under the heading of “Western Civilization.”

Because Canaan collapsed, the Israelites emerged as a distinct people and produced the Bible — that sprawling, contradictory, magnificent text that, together with Greek thought, forms the twin foundation of the Western intellectual tradition. If the Bronze Age had not collapsed, we would not exist. Not as we are. Not with the ideas and institutions and arguments that define us. The catastrophe was the crucible.

Think of a forest fire. Every ecologist knows that periodic fires are essential to the health of a forest ecosystem. The fire clears the deadwood, returns nutrients to the soil, opens space for new growth. A forest that never burns becomes brittle — its resilience declines, its biodiversity shrinks, its trees grow weak.

And when a fire finally does come to a forest that has not burned in too long, the blaze is not regenerative. It is apocalyptic. It consumes everything because there is too much accumulated fuel. The lesson is obvious and deeply uncomfortable: suppressing collapse does not prevent catastrophe. It guarantees that when catastrophe finally arrives, it will be total.

Egalitarian societies — the ones that existed before the permanent hereditary elite seized control — were, by all accounts, remarkably stable. They were typically small, rarely exceeding ten thousand people. They had leaders but not owners. There was no private property in any meaningful sense. Resources were shared. Conflict was minimal, because there was nothing to fight over. These societies were often matrilineal, with women wielding significant authority — women who, crucially, could control population growth through their own reproductive choices, preventing the kind of demographic pressure that fuels competition and war. These societies were peaceful, stable, and, by the standards of the world they inhabited, successful.

They were also doomed.

Because the moment hierarchical societies appeared — societies with permanent elites, with organization, wealth, and scale — the egalitarian societies were outcompeted and absorbed. An egalitarian society of ten thousand people cannot defend itself against a hierarchical empire of a million. The organized, the wealthy, the numerous will always overwhelm the small and the equal. This is not a moral judgment. It is a structural observation. Egalitarianism works beautifully until it encounters hierarchy, at which point it is devoured.

The history of humanity is, in large part, the history of egalitarian societies being conquered by hierarchical ones — and of hierarchical societies then collapsing under the weight of their own internal contradictions, only to be replaced by new hierarchical societies that will, in turn, collapse in exactly the same way.

This is the cycle. And when we study the city-states of Sumer in Mesopotamia — those dozens of competing polities, some egalitarian, some hierarchical, all jostling for dominance — we see the same dynamic playing out in miniature. The societies that were more organized, more wealthy, and more populous always won. The egalitarian holdouts were absorbed or destroyed. And the victors, having achieved dominance, immediately began the process of elite overproduction and rent-seeking that would eventually bring them down in turn.

The rise of China over the past forty years follows the same logic: a small number of entrepreneurs worked with extraordinary intensity, generating enormous wealth, while the broader population provided the labor. You do not

need everyone to work hard for a society to become rich. You need a small group of driven individuals — and a very large group of people willing, or compelled, to do as they are told. This is the formula for wealth, and it is also the formula for eventual catastrophe.

The point — the only point that matters, really, after all the names and dates and archaeological minutiae have faded from memory — is that human history is not a story of progress. It is a story of cycles. Societies rise because hierarchy gives them the tools to organize, accumulate, and scale. Societies fall because hierarchy gives the elite the incentive to extract, speculate, and hoard until the entire structure collapses under the weight of their appetites.

The Bronze Age Collapse was not an anomaly. It was a preview. The Maya collapse was not an anomaly. It was a confirmation. And our own civilization, with its billionaires and its bubbles and its accelerating inequality and its elites who have long since ceased to produce anything except financial instruments, perverse lust and self-congratulation — well. Draw your own conclusions.

Nobody is saying that a permanent hereditary elite is a good idea. It is a terrible idea, obviously, if you happen to be one of the people being charged rent for the privilege of existing. But it wins. It wins because it is more organized, wealthier, and larger than the alternatives. It wins because the people at the top are incentivized to work hard — not to create value, but to capture it — and that captured value funds the armies and the bureaucracies and the monumental architecture that crushes all competitors. It wins, and then it destroys itself, and then something new grows in the ashes.

The facts do not matter. The names do not matter — Mycenae, Hattusa, Memphis, Tikal, Washington they are all the same story in different costumes. What matters is the idea: that the structure of human civilization contains the seeds of its own destruction, that the elite who build it will inevitably hollow it out, that collapse is not a bug but a feature, and that the only thing more dangerous than a civilization that falls is one that refuses to.

Sleep well.