

Can the Center Ever Hold?

By
Dan White, October 23, 2023

In the final episode of season eight of the television show “Inspector Morse,” Morse is explaining to a young police officer what makes a good detective. He says that a good detective never stops asking “why” until all the facts tie together to create a clear answer.

We recently completed a 7-day driving trip through the Four Corners area, one that fulfilled two of Judy’s “bucket list” visits: Chaco Canyon and Hovenweep. Prior to leaving, she finished reading *Anasazi America* by David E. Stuart, Professor of Archeology at the University of New Mexico. The back cover promo for the book begins “At the height of their power in the late eleventh century, the Chaco Anasazi dominated a territory in the American Southwest larger than any European principality of the time.”

The piece continues: “It took Anasazi farmers more than seven centuries to create classic Chacoan civilization, which lasted 200 years—only to collapse spectacularly in a mere 40.” Then, the pertinent questions: ‘why did such a great society collapse? Who survived? Why?’

Professor Stuart posits that there are two broad categories of society—powerful and efficient. A powerful society tends to be “more complex, more wasteful of energy, more competitive, and faster paced than an efficient one.” Constant growth is required in such a society. When the resources needed to sustain constant growth disappear, an efficient society “is advantageous because its simpler, less wasteful structure is much more easily sustained in times of scarcity.”

But why should a powerful society falter? Stuart notes that the great building achievements of the Chacoan culture (and the buildings are impressive!) depended upon the labors of a working class, mostly farmers, who were rewarded for their work out of the plenty that was available. A smaller elite class, including the religious leaders, were not as involved in the physical act of construction and production of food and manufactured goods. Unsurprisingly, an economic gap developed.

As long as there was plenty, fueled by trade and abundant harvests watered by enough rainfall, the gap was tolerated. However, a sustained 2-decade drought restricted continued growth of food production needed to feed a population which had increased substantially.

Scarcity developed, along with competition for resources. The farmers figured that they would make out best if they went back to farming and taking care of their own kin. Farmers and artisans moved from the organized system of the Chaco Great House centers to higher elevations where water was more reliable, building smaller dwellings in smaller communities, similar to what was true before the rise of the "Chacoan Phenomenon," as it's called.

The Chacoan culture, with its Great Houses and impressive network of roads connected distant places and a far-flung trading system, chose the constant growth model, which contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Even as it appeared things were changing, the elites of Chaco continued to build new Great Houses as if everything was fine, nothing needed to change.

In the imagery of William Butler Yeats, things fell apart, the center could not hold.

Professor Stuart used his examination of Chacoan culture to raise questions about the United States. The United States has the largest economy in the world with impressive wealth (a powerful society). Yet, there is a widening disparity in wages, a decline in community experiences that bind people together. To his surprise, he found a significant number of measures of the quality of life where the United States serves its citizens less well, when compared to other industrialized societies: literacy rates, infant mortality, life expectancy at birth, and several more. Why? Will the end result be the equivalent of what happened in the Chacoan society?

When I taught U.S. History to high school students in the 1980s, I used as a text *Out of Our Past*, by Carl N. Degler, a distinguished history professor at Stanford. It was in that book that I first encountered the phrase “seeds of its own destruction.” Degler wrote that “Puritanism contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction.” Subsequently, I learned that the phrase had its own history.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for example, asserted in the 19th century that capitalism contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction because of the class antagonism it created. About the same point in that century, Mark Twain wrote: “Every civilization carries the seeds of its own destruction, and the same cycle shows in them all. The Republic is born, flourishes, decays into plutocracy, and is captured by the shoemaker whom the mercenaries and millionaires make into a king. The people invent their oppressors, and the oppressors serve the function for which they are invented.”

The phrase even made it into fiction. Princess Irulan, in Frank Herbert’s “Dune,” proclaimed “if history teaches us anything, it is simply this: every revolution carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. And empires that rise, will one day fall.”

Why? A possible explanation: the cycle to which Twain referred has seemed to produce in the elites of a society the illusion—the way things are is the way things should be, will always be.

People of a Certain Age, aren’t we passed the point where we believe that we can re-create the past, resurrect the ways things were? We know that change is a constant. Yet whole societies can engage in sustaining the fiction that they are different from the rest of societies throughout history, that the cycle does not apply to them. Did that happen in Chaco? Why?

Professor Stuart’s analysis is, of course, merely informed speculation. Many archeological facts fit into his theory of why Chaco fell apart. But Inspector Morse would likely not be persuaded that Stuart’s scenario is irrefutably the way things were. Even Stuart acknowledges that there are things we just don’t know about ancient Puebloan societies, and never will.

Still, the decline of Chaco seems consistent with a pattern in history of cultures rising and falling. Explaining why might be as simple as accepting that Yeats was right.

Click here to email your comments to Dan: [Click here](#)