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COLLAPSES AHEAD: FOUNDATIONS FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF COLLAPSE

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Abstract

Collapse has long been studied in archaeology, history, and ecology, but sociology has yet to systematically address it as a distinct social process. This article lays the groundwork for a sociology of collapse by synthesising major explanatory traditions—from ecological determinism and civilisational cycles to systemic, risk, and acceleration theories—and reframing collapse as the disintegration of social facts, legitimacy, and collective capacity. Rather than viewing collapse as an abrupt end-state, it is conceptualised as a multidimensional process of systemic transformation involving material breakdown, loss, and reorganisation. The article identifies six interrelated sociological dimensions of collapse: (1) systemic transformation and the reconfiguration of institutions; (2) loss of material, cultural, and affective worlds; (3) erosion of collective capacity to sustain essential functions; (4) relational and multi-scalar interdependence of crises; (5) normative and political inequalities shaping who experiences collapse and who achieves resilience; and (6) the need for a reflexive and public sociology that engages with collapse discourse as both diagnosis and civic practice. By situating collapse within broader debates on resilience, planetary limits, and justice, the paper argues that collapse reveals, in negative form, the fragility of the social facts that constitute collective life. A sociology of collapse thus illuminates how societies interpret and respond to systemic disruption—and how possibilities for renewal, solidarity, and moral reconstruction emerge amid disintegration.

Keywords: *collapse, resilience, systemic risk, inequality, public sociology*

1. INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE SOCIOLOGY OF COLLAPSE

Collapse has marked human history, from the fall of ancient civilisations to the implosion of modern states. Its contemporary relevance, however, is amplified by accelerating climate change, ecological degradation, financial volatility, and political instability. In both academic and public discourse, the spectre of “collapse” looms large. Yet, while disciplines such as history, archaeology, and environmental studies have developed robust frameworks for analysing collapse, sociology has yet to fully embrace it as a systematic object of inquiry.

Despite the ubiquity of collapse in human history, the concept itself remains theoretically dispersed and empirically fragmented across disciplines. The most comprehensive synthesis to date is offered by Brozović (2023), who reviewed more than 400 publica-

tions and identified five major scholarly conversations—ranging from studies of past civilisations to fictional and future-oriented scenarios. His review highlights persistent theoretical tensions between environmental determinism and human agency, collapse and resilience, and pessimistic and optimistic outlooks on the future. Yet, as Brozović (2023) concludes, the field remains fragmented and undertheorised in sociological terms. Sociology's potential lies in uncovering how collapse is socially mediated—how collective meanings, institutions, and power relations structure both the experience and the interpretation of breakdown. Building upon this groundwork, the present article advances a specifically sociological framework of collapse—one that situates systemic transformation, loss of collective capacity, and reflexive meaning-making at the core of contemporary collapse research.

Collapse is never merely material—a matter of environmental depletion, economic contraction, or political breakdown. It is also symbolic and relational: it reshapes collective identities, disrupts cultural meanings, and forces individuals and groups to renegotiate norms, values, and solidarities under conditions of stress. It entails profound forms of loss—of continuity, legitimacy, and shared meaning—that unsettle the moral foundations of social life. To capture this multidimensionality, the article draws inspiration from Pitirim Sorokin's classic formulation of sociology as the study of the interplay between personality, society, and culture. Collapse unsettles all three dimensions: it disrupts individual lives and biographies, undermines institutional coherence, and destabilises cultural systems of meaning.

The aim here is to sketch the foundations for a sociology of collapse. This emerging perspective draws on insights from environmental sociology, historical sociology, and systems theory, while extending core sociological concerns with inequality, power, and collective action. It asks: How do societies experience and interpret collapse? What social mechanisms accelerate or mitigate collapse trajectories? In what ways do collapse dynamics reproduce existing inequalities? What ethical and political responsibilities accompany the sociological study of decline in an age of uncertainty?

Rather than treating collapse as an inevitable end-state, the sociology of collapse conceives it as a dynamic process of systemic transformation—one that may culminate in disintegration, but can also generate adaptation, reorganisation, or the emergence of novel social forms. This perspective opens a dialogue between sociological analysis and public debates on resilience, justice, and the futures of collective life. In doing so, it marks a conceptual distinction between social change as the adaptive reconfiguration of social order and collapse as its disintegration—the moment when the structures that sustain collective life lose their coherence.

2. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Ecological and Environmental Theories of Collapse

Among the many explanations for societal collapse, ecological and environmental theories occupy a central place. These approaches emphasise the fundamental dependence

of human societies on natural systems and the consequences of exceeding ecological thresholds. From classical accounts of environmental degradation to contemporary concerns about planetary boundaries, they highlight how soil, water, forests, and climate form the non-negotiable foundations of social life. At the same time, such theories have been criticised for ecological determinism, prompting more nuanced perspectives that stress multicausality, adaptation, and resilience. The following subsections trace this intellectual trajectory—from deterministic models of overshoot and ecological failure, through resilience-oriented approaches, to recent frameworks that link ecological thresholds with social foundations and cultural values.

2.1.1 Ecological Determinism: Collapse as Environmental Constraint

One of the most prominent strands of collapse theory interprets societal breakdown as the consequence of environmental limits. Perhaps the best-known exponent in popular literature is Jared Diamond, who identifies five recurring factors that undermine societies: environmental degradation, climate change, hostile neighbours, declining trade, and inadequate societal responses (Diamond, 2005). For Diamond, environmental mismanagement—whether deforestation on Easter Island or soil erosion in Norse Greenland—creates cascading vulnerabilities that, when compounded by external shocks, lead to irreversible decline. In this framework, societies “choose to fail” when they are unable or unwilling to confront ecological constraints.¹

Diamond’s account echoes earlier ecological critiques such as William Catton’s *Overshoot* (1982), which conceptualises human societies as ecological systems capable of exceeding their carrying capacity. For Catton, industrial modernity represents a particularly acute form of overshoot: technological progress temporarily expands resource frontiers but at the cost of accelerating depletion. Collapse, then, is not merely a historical pattern but an ecological inevitability when societies exceed the regenerative capacity of their environments.

This concern has been extended in contemporary analyses such as Lester Brown’s *World on the Edge* (2011). Brown documents how the overuse of water, soil erosion, deforestation, overfishing, and climate instability are already eroding the “natural support systems” of the world economy. He warns that we face a “perfect storm” of food, water, and energy crises, which could push states into failure and global systems toward unravelling. Crucially, Brown emphasises that ecological breakdown cannot be separated

¹ While Diamond’s *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005) brought unprecedented public attention to the idea of societal collapse, its sweeping, environmentally deterministic explanations have been widely critiqued within academia. A key response is *Questioning Collapse: Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability, and the Aftermath of Empire* (McAnany & Yoffee, 2012), a collection that systematically revisits Diamond’s case studies to show that many so-called “collapses” involved processes of adaptation, resilience, and social transformation rather than terminal decline. The volume remains an essential reference for grounding discussions of collapse in more empirically nuanced and theoretically informed scholarship, even as Diamond’s popular works continue to shape broader public discourse.

from political choices, such as misplaced military spending at the expense of environmental security, thereby linking ecological stress to governance and inequality. Both Diamond and Catton represent what may be termed an ecological determinist perspective. Collapse, in their view, stems primarily from the inability of human systems to maintain equilibrium with ecological conditions. This framing has the advantage of highlighting the non-negotiable role of the environment: civilisations depend on soil, forests, water, and climate, and their neglect or exhaustion has recurrently destabilised societies. It also resonates strongly with contemporary anxieties about climate change, biodiversity loss, and planetary boundaries. Yet this determinist emphasis also has limitations. By framing collapse as the inevitable consequence of environmental stress, it risks underestimating the social and cultural dimensions of how societies interpret and respond to crises. Not all ecological pressures lead to collapse, and not all collapses are primarily ecological in origin. As critics have pointed out, deterministic models often neglect the agency of social actors, the role of institutions, and the capacity for resilience. This opens the way for alternative approaches that emphasise multicausality and adaptation, of which the work of Butzer and Endfield (2012) is exemplary.

2.1.2 Multicausality and Adaptability: Beyond Environmental Determinism

While environmental stress has often been singled out as a driver of societal collapse, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises that ecological factors alone are insufficient to explain why some societies disintegrate while others endure. In contrast to the deterministic tone of Diamond's model of "ecocide" or Catton's concept of "overshoot," Butzer and Endfield (2012) argue for a more nuanced view in which collapse is best understood as a multicausal and contingent transformation rather than an inevitable environmental fate. Their analysis of twelve historical case studies demonstrates that although seven underwent severe transformation, five others avoided collapse altogether, adapting through environmental, political, or socio-cultural resilience. This finding challenges the popular "apocalyptic" narratives of collapse and shows that resilience deserves as much attention as vulnerability. Collapse outcomes, in this view, are unpredictable, path-dependent, and filtered through the unique cognitive and cultural capacities of each society.

Butzer (1996) further cautions against simplistic causal models that overemphasise climatic or environmental shocks. He emphasises that collapse is rarely abrupt, and that resilience often depends on leadership, cultural solidarity, and opportunities for social innovation. Historical examples show that even in times of disintegration, cultural memory and local institutions can lay the foundation for renewal. This perspective underscores the importance of viewing collapse not only through the lens of ecological stressors but also through the dynamics of political legitimacy, elite behaviour, and collective action. To advance this perspective, Butzer and Endfield (2012) propose a broader, integrative definition of collapse as a *large-scale transformation with enduring impact across interdependent variables*. These include: 1. Environmental change and resilience; 2. Demography and settlement patterns; 3. Socio-economic structures; 4. Political institutions; 5. Ideology and cultural memory.

This definition moves collapse studies away from narrow causal “shopping lists” toward an appreciation of complex socio-ecological interactions. For instance, the fate of Old versus New Kingdom Egypt cannot be explained by climate variability alone. Instead, the degree of resilience hinged on leadership, elite support, and ideological reaffirmation, which either destabilised the state or allowed for its reconstitution.² Similarly, the Norse colonies of Greenland succumbed to environmental pressures during the Little Ice Age,³ whereas contemporary Icelandic settlements adapted by diversifying subsistence strategies and maintaining external networks. The key insight is that collapse is not always terminal. Historical cases often reveal “adaptive cycles,”⁴ in which societies reconfigure institutions, strategies, or cultural frameworks to survive crises. Transformation may be painful, but it can also stimulate innovation and renewal. Collapse, then, is not simply an endpoint but part of a broader resilience cycle in which failure, adaptation, and reconstitution coexist. For sociology, this perspective underscores the necessity of examining collapse not merely as ecological breakdown but as a social process of meaning-making and adaptation. Human cognition, cultural values, and collective memory fundamentally shape how crises are interpreted and acted upon. In this sense, collapse studies intersect with the sociology of culture, institutions, and collective action: they remind us that societies are not passive victims of environmental shocks but active agents negotiating pathways of resilience or decline. These insights point to the need for a broader conceptual lens: one that can capture not only the multicausal interactions within societies but also the global ecological thresholds within which all societies are embedded. Resilience, in this sense, cannot be understood apart from planetary limits and the socio-political values that shape how those limits are navigated.

2.1.3 Resilience Theory and Planetary Boundaries: Towards a Socio-Ecological Synthesis

The concept of resilience emerged within ecology, where C. S. Holling (1973) defined it as a measure of an ecosystem’s capacity to absorb disturbance and maintain its core functions. Early formulations emphasised stability and the ability to “bounce back” to an equilibrium state after disruption. This view, however, has since been expanded by resilience theorists who describe ecosystems and societies alike as complex adaptive systems. Gunderson and Pritchard (2002) emphasise that resilience is not about static recovery but about the capacity to persist amid change, while Walker et al. (2004) and Cumming and Collier (2005) highlight that systems may undergo transformation yet retain their

2 The “collapse” of Egypt’s Old Kingdom (c. 2200 BCE) is often linked to a prolonged drought, yet subsequent re-centralisation during the Middle Kingdom illustrates how political leadership, ideology, and institutional adaptation mediated environmental stress (Butzer & Endfield, 2012; Middleton, 2017).

3 The Norse settlements in Greenland (c. 985–1450 CE) declined during the onset of the Little Ice Age, whereas nearby Icelandic communities adapted by diversifying subsistence strategies and maintaining maritime trade networks (Dugmore, Keller, & McGovern, 2007; Dugmore et al., 2012).

4 The term “adaptive cycle” derives from resilience theory (Holling, 1987), describing phases of growth, conservation, release, and reorganisation within complex socio-ecological systems.

essential identity. Applied to societies, this perspective has generated both insights and critiques. On the one hand, the resilience framework underscores the interdependence of social and ecological dynamics. Human communities depend on ecosystem services for survival, and the erosion of those services undermines social stability. On the other hand, simply importing ecological definitions risks ignoring intentionality, reflexivity, and power relations that shape human action (Adger, 2000). From a sociological standpoint, resilience cannot be reduced to the persistence of existing structures, since societies may endure in forms that reproduce inequality, ecological devastation, or authoritarian rule. The resilience of neoliberal capitalism after the 2008 crisis is an instructive case: durable, yet in many respects undesirable. The planetary boundaries framework proposed by Rockström and colleagues (Johan; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015) extends resilience thinking to the global scale by identifying nine biophysical thresholds that delineate a “safe operating space for humanity.” Already, several boundaries—climate change, biodiversity loss, biogeochemical cycles, land-system change, and novel entities—have been transgressed. The framework highlights that the Earth system itself has limits, and exceeding them risks triggering abrupt, nonlinear change. Importantly, this model introduces the idea that resilience is not only about societies but about the biosphere as a whole.

Building on this, Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics (2017) integrates social foundations with planetary boundaries, representing resilience as the capacity to sustain humanity within a “safe and just space.” This visual model recognises that ecological thresholds and social needs are interdependent: societies cannot be resilient if they undermine the Earth’s life-support systems, nor if they fail to provide access to health, education, equity, and voice. Dan O’Neill and associates (O’Neill, Fanning, Lamb, & Steinberger, 2018) empirically operationalised this framework by assessing how nations perform relative to biophysical boundaries and social indicators, revealing that no country currently meets social needs for all within sustainable ecological limits. Their work underscores the structural and distributive challenges embedded in achieving resilience across scales.

At the same time, degrowth scholars have advanced the doughnut approach through the degrowth doughnut (Domazet, 2026; Domazet et al., 2020), which reframes Doughnut Economics as a principle-theory model rather than a mechanistic one. In this extended version, the doughnut incorporates cultural and political boundaries alongside biophysical and socio-economic ones, recognising that values, power relations, and dominant ideologies are themselves determinants of sustainability. Indicators such as trust, democracy, and solidarity thus become critical components of systemic resilience, shaping whether societies adapt through cooperation or fracture under stress. This socio-ecological turn in resilience theory has important implications for collapse studies. It suggests that resilience is not a neutral capacity but a contested and normative one. To ask whether a society is resilient is also to ask: resilient for whom, to what, and at what cost? From a sociological perspective, resilience entails navigating shocks while confronting structural inequalities, cultural values, and political struggles that

determine which trajectories are possible. In this light, resilience can be both conservative—preserving unjust or unsustainable orders—or transformative, opening pathways toward more just and sustainable futures. Building on these critiques of environmental determinism and the recognition of multicausality, resilience theory and the planetary boundaries framework provide a useful foundation for linking ecological science with sociological inquiry. Conceptually, resilience and collapse form the opposing poles of a shared dynamic. Resilience signifies the capacity of social–ecological systems to reorganise and sustain coherence amid disturbance, whereas collapse signals the exhaustion of that capacity—the moment when adaptive structures can no longer reproduce social and ecological order.

Taken together, ecological determinism, multicausality, and resilience theory highlight that collapse must be situated within both socio-ecological complexity and planetary limits; yet they also reveal that resilience is shaped by governance, institutions, and collective decision-making—an issue taken up in the following section on geopolitical and institutional theories.

2.2 Civilisational Cycles, Legitimacy, and Cultural Decline

Beyond environmental explanations (Section 2.1), another intellectual tradition interprets collapse as a civilisational process—the erosion of legitimacy, social cohesion, and moral meaning that binds societies together. From this perspective, civilisations endure not only through resources and governance but through the symbolic and normative orders that sustain collective identity and justify power. When these moral foundations weaken, institutions lose credibility, elites become self-serving, and collective purpose dissolves.

Civilisational theories trace these dynamics through long historical arcs, linking the vitality or decay of cultures to shifts in solidarity, creativity, and authority. From Ibn Khaldun's account of dynastic cohesion to Toynbee's and Spengler's models of civilisational morphology, and later to Eisenstadt's and Huntington's twentieth-century reinterpretations, scholars have sought to explain how societies rise through unity and decline through moral exhaustion. This section revisits these perspectives to show how cultural and institutional breakdowns interact, and how the loss of legitimacy and meaning prefigures the systemic crises explored in Section 2.3.

2.2.1 Classical Theories of Cyclical Rise and Fall

The idea that civilisations follow recurrent cycles of growth and decay has deep roots in classical thought. Among the earliest systematic formulations is that of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), whose Muqaddimah (1377/1958) outlined a dynamic sociology of dynastic rise and decline. His central concept, 'asabiyyah—often translated as social cohesion or collective solidarity—explains how groups bound by shared struggle and moral discipline acquire the strength to found new political orders. Over time, prosperity and luxury corrode this solidarity, producing complacency, elite decadence, and loss

of legitimacy. For Khaldun, collapse thus arises from internal moral decay rather than external invasion, and renewal depends on the restoration of cohesion through new leadership and moral clarity (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

Two centuries later, Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1725) offered a complementary cyclical vision of history. Vico proposed that societies pass through recurring "ages"—divine, heroic, and human—each embodying distinct moral and symbolic orders. When rationality and self-interest displace shared belief and virtue, societies descend into barbarism of reflection, only to regenerate through renewed myth and faith. Like Khaldun, Vico viewed decline as both inevitable and transformative: moral exhaustion sets the stage for cultural rebirth (Berlin, 1992).

These early cyclical models already contain recognisably sociological insights. They link material prosperity to moral vulnerability and show how legitimacy depends on the moral imagination sustaining authority. Later theories of elite circulation, moral regulation, and collective conscience would build on this intuition that collapse begins in the erosion of solidarity and meaning before manifesting in political or economic disintegration.

2.2.2 Modern Civilisational Morphology

In the early twentieth century, the cyclical view of history was revitalised through large-scale theories of civilisational morphology, which sought to identify recurring patterns in the rise and decline of complex societies. Among the most influential were Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee, whose works transformed earlier moral and historical reflections into comprehensive philosophies of civilisation. Both authors treated civilisations as dynamic, self-contained entities governed by internal logics of growth, maturation, and decay, yet they diverged sharply in their assessment of human agency.

In *The Decline of the West* (1918/1926), Spengler portrayed civilisations as living organisms progressing through predictable life cycles of cultural flowering and eventual exhaustion. Each civilisation, he argued, possesses a distinctive "cultural soul" that animates its art, science, religion, and institutions. Decline sets in when this creative energy ossifies into technocratic rationality, bureaucratic control, and materialism—signs of transition from *Kultur* to *Zivilisation* (Spengler, 1926). Although Spengler's biological determinism and Eurocentrism have drawn extensive criticism, his central insight remains enduring: the vitality of institutions depends on deeper cultural energies and collective meaning. His model resonated with the anxieties of interwar Europe, framing modernity itself as a phase of spiritual senescence.

Arnold Toynbee, in contrast, offered a more voluntarist interpretation in *A Study of History* (1934–1961). Civilisations, he argued, rise through the creative response of minorities to challenges—ecological, social, or moral—and collapse when these elites lose imagination, relying on coercion or escapism instead. Toynbee thus introduced an ethical dimension absent from Spengler: decline reflects not destiny but the failure of moral leadership and adaptive creativity. Collapse may therefore contain the potential for renewal once new moral and spiritual resources are mobilised. His comparative

analysis of over twenty civilisations transformed cyclical thinking into a proto-systemic framework grounded in patterns of challenge and response (Toynbee, 1946).

Analogous ideas appear in other traditions. In Chinese historiography, the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven linked dynastic succession to moral legitimacy: when rulers became corrupt or neglectful, Heaven withdrew its sanction, justifying their overthrow (Pines, 2009; Zhao, 2015). Similarly, Hindu cosmology conceives of time as a series of yugas—ages of moral ascent and decline—culminating in renewal after decay (Eliade, 1954; Flood, 1996; Zimmer, 1951). These cross-cultural parallels highlight a universal intuition: civilisations perish not only through conquest or scarcity but through the internal exhaustion of moral and symbolic legitimacy. The modern morphology of civilisation thus links cultural meaning, institutional vitality, and the ethics of leadership—a theme that later sociologists would reinterpret through the lenses of modernisation and world-systems analysis.

Here it is important to reflect on early sociological attempts to explain civilisational decline that can already be found in Max Weber's analysis of the social causes of the decline of ancient culture, where the disintegration of social and economic foundations is understood as a gradual, internally driven process rather than the result of external shocks alone (Utz, 2020). Although Weber did not theorise collapse in relation to modern industrial societies, his work represents an important sociological precedent for analysing long-term processes of systemic erosion and institutional decline.

2.2.3 Cultural-Sociological Reinterpretations

Twentieth-century sociology reframed civilisational ideas into more systematic analyses linking cultural meaning, institutional legitimacy, and social structure. While the moral and cyclical vocabulary of earlier thinkers persisted, sociologists increasingly sought to ground these processes in empirically observable cultural and institutional dynamics. This produced a line of theorising that bridges historical philosophy, macro-sociology, and comparative civilisational analysis.

Pitirim Sorokin's monumental *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937–1941) offered one of the earliest comprehensive sociological reinterpretations of civilisational change (Sorokin, 2016). He described cultural history as an oscillation between “ideational” orientations centred on spiritual and transcendent values, and “sensate” orientations focused on material and empirical reality. Societies, Sorokin argued, enter crisis when their dominant cultural mentality becomes saturated—when materialism or scepticism undermines moral integration. Collapse, in this framework, is a phase of cultural disorganisation, where institutions persist but lose legitimacy because their guiding values no longer resonate with collective experience. Sorokin's diagnosis of twentieth-century Western culture as a declining “sensate” civilisation anticipated later concerns with moral fatigue, consumerism, and the search for transcendence in secular modernity.

Subsequent macro-sociological frameworks translated this moral concern into structural and systemic terms. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory analysed collapse and

renewal as phases in the long-term evolution of the capitalist world-economy (Wallerstein, 1974, 1980, 1989, 2011). Periodic crises arise when the core regions' economic and ideological hegemony erodes, leading to systemic instability. For Wallerstein, material contradictions are inseparable from ideological exhaustion: legitimacy falters when the ruling order can no longer justify inequality or sustain faith in progress. Similarly, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000) reframed civilisational analysis for the global age. Rejecting the notion of a single Western path to modernity, Eisenstadt argued that each civilisation reinterprets modern institutions—science, democracy, bureaucracy—through its own cultural and religious frameworks. Modernity, therefore, does not erase civilisational difference but multiplies it, producing divergent trajectories of legitimacy, adaptation, and resilience. This pluralisation of modernity underscores that collapse and renewal are not universal processes but contextually embedded in distinct moral and symbolic orders.

If Eisenstadt emphasised plurality and reflexivity, Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* (1993) represented a more deterministic return to civilisational essentialism. In the post-Cold War world, Huntington predicted that cultural fault lines would replace ideological conflicts, positioning civilisations as enduring and potentially incompatible blocs. While widely criticised for cultural reductionism, his argument highlighted how civilisational paradigms continue to shape global discourses of threat and decline (Huntington, 1996). Read sociologically, *The Clash of Civilisations* illustrates how elites and institutions mobilise civilisational identities to explain systemic uncertainty, turning cultural difference into geopolitical narrative.

Other mid- and late-twentieth-century thinkers further deepened the sociological reading of civilisational dynamics. Robert Bellah's studies of religious evolution (Bellah, 1967, 2011) traced how moral and symbolic frameworks legitimise social orders across eras, while Shmuel Eisenstadt and Johann P. Arnason (2017) explored the comparative sociology of civilisations as evolving constellations of value, power, and reflexivity. Norbert Elias's (2000) analysis of the civilising process and Fernand Braudel's (1980) *longue-durée* historiography likewise revealed how shifts in everyday discipline, temporality, and collective emotion precede large-scale political transformation. Taken together, these perspectives illuminate the enduring sociological insight that civilisations do not collapse solely from external shocks or material scarcity, but from the disintegration of the moral and symbolic frameworks that sustain legitimacy and social cooperation. Across these diverse formulations—from Ibn Khaldun's 'asabiyyah and Vico's moral cycles to Spengler's and Toynbee's morphologies and the sociological reinterpretations of Sorokin, Wallerstein, and Eisenstadt—a common thread emerges: civilisations collapse not merely through material exhaustion but through the erosion of meaning and legitimacy. Moral disintegration, elite stagnation, and loss of collective purpose precede or accompany economic and political breakdowns, revealing that the foundations of social order are ultimately symbolic. Yet these moral and cultural dimensions also generate the potential for renewal: new value systems and institutional forms may arise from crisis, reconstituting legitimacy on transformed grounds. This insight situates ci-

vilisational theories within the broader sociology of collapse, where cultural fatigue and institutional decay intersect with systemic and energetic limits. The next section turns to these material and structural underpinnings—biophysical and systemic theories—which reinterpret collapse not as a failure of meaning but as a dynamic consequence of complex socio-ecological feedbacks operating at planetary scale.

2.3 Biophysical and Systemic Theories

Beyond environmental determinism (Section 2.1) and civilisational or cultural explanations (Section 2.2), a third body of theory interprets collapse not as a single cause or event, but as an emergent property of complex socio-ecological systems. These perspectives emphasise biophysical flows, energy constraints, and global interdependencies rather than discrete shocks or institutional breakdowns. Collapse, in this view, results when systemic feedbacks—population growth, industrial expansion, resource depletion, and pollution—interact in ways that push societies beyond their adaptive thresholds. The focus is less on why particular civilisations fail and more on the dynamics of the global system as a whole.

2.3.1 The Limits to Growth and Overshoot Dynamics

One of the most influential systemic perspectives is the *Limits to Growth* report by Meadows et al. (1972), which employed the World3 computer model to simulate long-term interactions between population, industrial production, food supply, resource depletion, and pollution. The model demonstrated that under a “business as usual” trajectory, exponential growth in population and consumption would eventually overshoot the planet’s carrying capacity, leading to decline in multiple subsystems and ultimately systemic collapse. Crucially, collapse here is not the product of a single shock but of interacting feedback loops that reinforce one another: declining resources constrain production, which undermines food supply, while pollution degrades environmental resilience.

Although criticised at the time for alleged pessimism, subsequent research has reinforced the report’s central insights. Graham Turner’s empirical assessments compared real-world data from 1970 to the early 2010s against the World3 scenarios and found a close fit with the “standard run” trajectory—the very scenario leading to overshoot and collapse (Turner, 2008; Turner, 2014). These comparisons suggest that the systemic warnings of the early 1970s were not misplaced, but rather offered a prescient picture of the vulnerabilities embedded in global socio-economic trends.

Later updates by Meadows and colleagues sharpened the diagnosis. In *Beyond the Limits* (1993), the authors argued that humanity had already entered a state of overshoot, exceeding the planet’s regenerative capacity in several domains. The *30-Year Update* (2004/2006) reiterated this conclusion with empirical evidence on deforestation, biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas accumulation, and ecological footprint data (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2004). By the early 2000s, the question was no longer whether

overshoot might occur but how societies could respond to its unfolding consequences. The authors stressed that collapse could still be avoided, but only through profound changes in technology, institutions, and cultural values—what they termed “a sustainability revolution.”

From a sociological point of view, the *Limits to Growth* tradition is significant not only for its systemic modelling but also for the reception of its warnings. It highlights how knowledge of systemic risk does not automatically translate into political action. The persistence of growth-oriented economic paradigms, despite repeated confirmation of overshoot, illustrates the cultural, institutional, and ideological barriers that mediate responses to systemic crises. Collapse in this sense is not simply the outcome of ecological or systemic dynamics, but also of societal resistance to confronting the structural limits of growth. This disjunction between scientific foresight and political inertia exemplifies how systemic risk becomes a sociological problem: not merely a matter of prediction, but of communication, trust, and institutional capacity.

2.3.2 *Energy, Complexity, and Socio-Metabolic Constraints*

Systemic theories of collapse also highlight the role of energy flows and socio-metabolic constraints. William Catton's *Overshoot* (1982) framed industrial modernity as a condition of ecological overshoot, enabled by what he called “phantom carrying capacity.” Fossil fuels and technological advances temporarily expanded the resource base, but at the cost of drawing down non-renewable stocks and undermining future resilience. From this perspective, collapse is not an aberration but an inevitable outcome of energy-intensive growth once the returns from fossil-fuelled expansion diminish.

A related body of work emphasises the concept of energy return on investment (EROI)—the ratio of energy gained from a resource to the energy required to extract it. Historically, early fossil fuel exploitation yielded extremely high EROI, enabling surpluses that supported industrialisation, welfare states, and military expansion. As societies turn to harder-to-access reserves or lower-density renewables, the net surplus declines, constraining the capacity to sustain complex infrastructures. Collapse, in this framework, follows not only from ecological degradation but also from the thermodynamic limits of energy systems that undergird social complexity (Hall, Cleveland, & Kaufmann, 1986; Hall, Lambert, & Balogh, 2014).

More recently, modelling approaches have incorporated inequality into these systemic dynamics. Motesharrei, Rivas, and Kalnay's the Human and Nature Dynamics (HANDY) model (2014) introduces a predator–prey framework with four interacting variables: Elites, Commoners, Nature, and Wealth. The model demonstrates that collapse can occur either through ecological strain or through economic stratification. Even if natural resources remain adequate, elite overconsumption and concentration of wealth can trigger breakdown by depriving the majority of access to subsistence. This highlights that systemic collapse is not purely biophysical but deeply social, shaped by the distribution of resources and the dynamics of power.

This linkage between energy flows and social organisation is most comprehensively theorised in Joseph A. Tainter's *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (1988). Drawing on archaeological and historical evidence, Tainter argued that complexity itself entails rising energetic and administrative costs. As problem-solving institutions proliferate, they generate diminishing marginal returns on social investment. Collapse, therefore, occurs not merely when external pressures mount, but when the energy available to sustain complexity falls below its maintenance threshold. In this view, societal disintegration represents an adaptive simplification—a reorganisation toward lower energy regimes rather than an anomalous breakdown. Later work has extended this argument by interpreting these “costs” in energetic terms, linking social complexity to the net energy available for sustaining it (Tainter & Hall, 2011).

From a sociological perspective, these socio-metabolic theories underscore that collapse is not merely about running out of energy or resources, but about how energy and wealth are mobilised, allocated, and controlled. The decline of EROI, the ingenuity gap, and elite overconsumption all reveal the structural vulnerabilities of growth-dependent societies. They also foreground inequality as a driver of collapse, showing that the capacity to adapt to systemic strain is unequally distributed. In this sense, energy and metabolism provide the material substrate of collapse, while social structures determine who bears its costs and who benefits from delaying it.

2.3.3 Tipping Points, Early-Warning Signals, and Cascades

A further dimension of systemic theories highlights the nonlinear dynamics of collapse. Complex systems often appear stable until they reach thresholds beyond which abrupt change occurs. Marten Scheffer (2016) demonstrates that ecosystems and societies approaching collapse exhibit identifiable early-warning indicators, such as slowing recovery rates and rising variability in system performance. Collapse, in this perspective, is not a gradual decline but a tipping-point phenomenon, where feedback loops suddenly amplify stress and drive rapid transformation. Such cascades can be observed in historical collapses as well as in contemporary risks such as climate-induced migration, financial contagion, or pandemics.

This tipping-point view is reflected in the emerging discourse of collapsology. Servigne and Stevens (2020b) argue that collapse should be understood as a systemic process in which ecological, economic, and social crises reinforce each other, producing self-reinforcing spirals of disruption. Collapsology is not only an academic framework but also a cultural one, mobilising public narratives that link climate change, biodiversity loss, economic inequality, and geopolitical instability into a common picture of systemic fragility. By framing collapse as both material and symbolic, collapsology highlights how the anticipation of tipping points shapes public imagination, policy debates, and social movements.

The tipping-point perspective also resonates beyond scientific modelling, shaping contemporary debates about how societies should respond to the risk of systemic break-

down. The controversy over green growth epitomises this struggle: it reflects competing visions of whether technological progress can stabilise the system or whether the logic of perpetual expansion itself drives it toward collapse. The debate around green growth illustrates the contested nature of these systemic framings. Proponents argue that technological innovation and efficiency gains can decouple economic growth from environmental harm. Yet a growing body of empirical evidence contradicts this assumption. Hickel and Kallis (2019) demonstrate that no empirical case supports absolute decoupling of GDP from material throughput at the global scale, and that decoupling carbon emissions at the speed required to meet climate targets is implausible. Meta-analyses by Ward et al. (2016) and Parrique et al. (2019) reach similar conclusions, showing that efficiency gains are typically offset by rebound effects and outsourcing of resource-intensive production. Haberl et al. (2020) further emphasise that the scale of biophysical limits renders continued GDP growth incompatible with planetary boundaries. From this perspective, reliance on green growth as a strategy is not only scientifically unfounded but politically dangerous, as it delays more transformative responses.

Recent contributions from economics extend this critique. Naudé (2023) contends that neither green growth nor degrowth is likely to prevent collapse. Green growth underestimates systemic limits, while degrowth may exacerbate inequality or prove politically infeasible. Instead, Naudé suggests that collapse may be an inevitable feature of complex societies, and that the challenge is not to avert it entirely but to manage it in ways that minimise harm and open pathways toward post-collapse reorganisation. This echoes the tipping-point logic: systemic breakdown may not be preventable, but it can be anticipated and navigated.

For sociology, the study of tipping points and cascades underscores the importance of both systemic dynamics and cultural narratives. Collapse is shaped not only by ecological thresholds and energetic constraints, but also by the political ideologies and institutional commitments that determine how societies interpret and respond to warning signs. The persistence of “green growth” narratives despite contrary evidence reveals how collapse is as much a matter of cultural denial and political inertia as of biophysical inevitability. In this sense, systemic theories bridge material and social processes, showing that tipping points are as much about the stories societies tell themselves as about the thresholds they cross.

Taken together, biophysical and systemic theories conceptualise collapse as an emergent property of global socio-metabolic processes. From *Limits to Growth* models of overshoot, through energy and inequality dynamics, to tipping-point cascades, these perspectives highlight how material and energetic constraints can destabilise entire systems. Their strength lies in shifting attention from particular civilisations to the global scale, revealing collapse as a planetary process. Yet they also underline that systemic risks are not interpreted in a vacuum: political ideologies such as “green growth” and institutional inertia shape how societies respond—or fail to respond—to warning signs. This recognition provides a bridge to accelerationist and risk-oriented theories (Section 2.4), which emphasise the speed, interconnectivity, and cascading nature of crises in contemporary global systems.

2.4 Acceleration, Risk, and Reflexivity Theories

Beyond ecological (Section 2.1), cultural (Section 2.2), and systemic (Section 2.3) explanations, a fourth body of theory emphasises the tempo of modern change and the amplification of risks in interconnected systems. In this perspective, collapse is not primarily the outcome of exceeding ecological thresholds or the exhaustion of institutions, but of societies being overwhelmed by the accelerating pace of technological, economic, and social transformations. As systems become increasingly fast, complex, and interdependent, their vulnerability to cascading failures intensifies. For sociology, these approaches are especially significant because they bring questions of risk perception, legitimacy, and collective response into the analysis of collapse.

2.4.1 The Acceleration of History

The Great Acceleration denotes the sharp, synchronised rise after ~1950 in both socio-economic drivers—population, GDP, fossil-energy use, cement and steel output, fertiliser consumption, water withdrawals, motorisation, air travel, and global trade—and Earth-system responses, including atmospheric CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O concentrations, global mean temperature, ocean acidification, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, land-cover conversion, and biodiversity loss (Steffen et al., 2011, 2015). Enabled by cheap fossil fuels, mass production, industrial agriculture, and globalised logistics, these indicators adopt near-exponential “hockey-stick” trajectories after the Second World War, marking a step-change in the scale and pace of human pressures on the biosphere (Steffen et al., 2015). Many scholars take this inflection as emblematic of the Anthropocene, when human activity became a dominant geological force (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000).

Hartmut Rosa (2013) gives this macro-trend a sociological grammar: social acceleration comprises (1) the acceleration of technological change, (2) the acceleration of social change (institutions, roles, careers), and (3) the acceleration of the pace of life. The result is desynchronisation: domains with slow “institutional time” (law, schooling, infrastructure, democratic deliberation) lag behind fast “system time” (digital platforms, finance, global supply chains). This produces disorientation and fragility, and legitimacy erodes when institutional time can no longer keep pace with social time. Rosa calls this the “shrinking present”—more change in less time without stable horizons for coordination.

Paul Virilio’s dromology⁵ names the logic of speed as a constitutive force of modernity: as velocity rises, space shrinks, reaction times compress, and control shifts from human deliberation to real-time systems. For Virilio, every technology co-produces its own

⁵ From the Greek *dromos* (race/run/course) + *-logy*, dromology is Paul Virilio’s term for the logic of speed—how rising velocity reorganises space, perception, technology, and power. For Virilio, acceleration is not a mere quantitative change but a new political rationality: the means

accident—the invention of the ship invents the shipwreck; of aviation, the crash; of nuclear power, the meltdown (Virilio, 1989). Acceleration doesn't just make accidents more likely; it changes their form. When infrastructures are fast and tightly networked, failures propagate faster than oversight can respond, producing what Virilio later calls the “integral accident”—events that are instantaneous, delocalised, and system-wide (Virilio, 1999, 2005). Instead of a confined mishap (a single vessel sinking), think grid-wide blackouts, market flash crashes, or cascading cyber-physical breakdowns that jump domains. In this sense, acceleration turns the accident from a local side effect into a systemic property of high-speed societies, complementing Perrow's insight that complex, tightly coupled systems make “normal accidents” inevitable (Perrow, 1984). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that acceleration is not merely a symptom of modernity but a driver of vulnerability. As social, technological, and economic systems operate at increasing speed, the margin for error shrinks and the consequences of breakdown intensify. Collapse, in this sense, is the product of a world moving too fast for its institutions, cultures, and infrastructures to sustain.

2.4.2 *Global Risk and Cascading Crises*

While the previous section examined tipping points and cascades in ecological and socio-metabolic systems—where collapse results from nonlinear feedbacks that push systems beyond critical thresholds—the focus here shifts to cascading failures within socio-technical and institutional networks. In risk sociology, “cascade” refers less to the crossing of environmental limits than to the rapid propagation of failure across tightly coupled infrastructures. The emphasis thus moves from biophysical thresholds to the fragility of interdependence: how complexity, connectivity, and speed transform local disturbances into global crises.

If acceleration theories emphasise the tempo of modernity, risk perspectives highlight the fragility of tightly coupled systems. Charles Perrow's (1984) theory of *normal accidents* argues that in complex, high-risk technologies—such as nuclear power plants, chemical industries, or financial systems—accidents are not exceptional but inevitable. The tight coupling of system components means that small failures can cascade rapidly, producing systemic breakdowns. Collapse, in this view, is not an outlier but an emergent property of complexity itself.

Thomas Homer-Dixon (2006) extends this insight to the societal scale through the notion of *synchronous failure*, in which multiple subsystems—energy, food, climate, and economy—fail simultaneously and reinforce one another. In such scenarios, crises do not occur sequentially but interact dynamically, amplifying their destructive effects. For

of movement and transmission (logistics, communications, weaponry) shape social form. Hence his claim that each technology co-produces its own accident, and that high-speed, networked infrastructures yield “integral accidents” that are delocalised and systemic (Virilio, 1989; 2005; see also 1997).

example, drought-induced food shortages can trigger economic instability and social unrest, which in turn erode the political capacity to respond to further environmental shocks. This feedback among domains transforms discrete problems into cascading crises that overwhelm adaptive capacity.

Contemporary analyses of systemic risk echo these concerns. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report (2024) consistently identifies environmental breakdown, economic volatility, cyber vulnerabilities, and pandemics as deeply interlinked threats. Each risk on its own may be disruptive, but their interaction multiplies the probability of cascading crises. Globalisation further intensifies these linkages, creating dense networks of interdependence that allow local disruptions to ripple across the planet in real time. Dirk Helbing (2013) similarly argues that the hyperconnectivity of modern systems produces conditions of systemic instability, where failures in one domain propagate uncontrollably across others.

From a sociological perspective, the significance of cascading-risk theories lies in how they challenge the idea of bounded crises. Instead of discrete or sectoral events, crises are increasingly systemic, with local failures transmitting through global networks of finance, trade, health, and communication. Collapse, then, is not simply the exhaustion of ecological limits or institutional legitimacy but the inherent vulnerability of systems whose very interconnection renders them prone to rapid, nonlinear, and unpredictable breakdown.

2.4.3 Reflexive Modernity and Risk Society

A third strand within acceleration and risk perspectives emphasises the reflexive character of modernity—the recognition that many of the dangers societies face are the unintended consequences of their own success. Ulrich Beck's Risk Society (1992) argued that modern hazards—nuclear fallout, toxic pollution, climate change—are qualitatively different from traditional dangers because they are manufactured by industrial and technological processes themselves. In Beck's view, modernity becomes reflexive when it is forced to confront the side effects of its own development. Collapse, under this lens, is not an external interruption of progress but the self-destruction of progress as its by-products escape institutional control.

Building on Beck's concept of manufactured uncertainty, Anthony Giddens (1999) highlights that global risks are not simply calculable probabilities but profound unknowns generated by modern technologies and social interdependence. Climate change exemplifies this condition: its trajectory depends not only on physical processes but also on unpredictable social, political, and technological feedbacks. Collapse, therefore, becomes bound up with the radical uncertainty of futures that societies themselves have set in motion.

Niklas Luhmann (1991) offers a complementary perspective by treating risk as a phenomenon of communication. For Luhmann, hazards may exist in nature, but risk emerges only when decisions are made that intentionally or unintentionally expose society to

potential harm. It is through communication that responsibility is attributed, trust negotiated, and legitimacy contested. Collapse, in this sense, is not only a biophysical or systemic process but also a communicative one, shaped by how institutions frame, deny, or assume responsibility for danger.

From a sociological standpoint, reflexivity underscores that collapse is inseparable from perception and interpretation. Societies may anticipate, deny, or normalise looming risks; they may mobilise action or become paralysed by contestation. Reflexive theories thus expand the scope of collapse studies beyond material thresholds to include the cultural and communicative processes through which risks are recognised and managed. Collapse is not only about what happens to societies but also about how societies imagine, narrate, and respond to the possibility of their own breakdown.

Beyond material processes, the idea of collapse also occupies a central place in the modern social imaginary. The fear of collapse—whether ecological, economic, or moral—functions as a mirror through which societies confront their own fragility and limits. As Beck (1992) observed, late modernity is organised around the anticipation of catastrophe, while cultural theorists from Dupuy (2013) to Žižek (2011) have shown how visions of the end express collective anxieties and moral desires. To imagine collapse is to fantasise about both punishment and renewal—about endings that might cleanse or redeem. Such imaginaries shape how societies interpret crisis, attribute blame, and define what futures remain conceivable.

Taken together, acceleration and risk theories show that collapse is not only the exhaustion of ecological resources or institutional capacities but also the product of modern societies' own speed, complexity, and reflexivity. The very dynamics of modernisation—technological acceleration, tightly coupled systems, and manufactured risks—generate vulnerabilities that societies struggle to perceive and govern. From a sociological perspective, acceleration undermines not only institutional adaptability but also the temporal foundations of legitimacy, as societies lose shared rhythms of stability, trust, and continuity. Collapse here is as much a matter of communication and perception as of material thresholds: how risks are anticipated, denied, or politicised deeply shapes outcomes. This perspective provides a bridge back to the cultural and civilisational theories (Section 2.2), which turn attention from systemic vulnerabilities to the deeper symbolic orders, value systems, and cultural trajectories that underpin societal resilience or decline.

3. TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF COLLAPSE

The preceding sections have traced major theoretical approaches to collapse, ranging from ecological determinism and institutional overextension to systemic feedbacks, risk cascades, and cultural exhaustion. Each perspective offers important insights, yet none fully captures collapse as a distinctly sociological phenomenon. For sociology, collapse must be understood not only as the breakdown of material systems but as a social process that reshapes institutions, identities, and cultural meanings. It entails both objective

disruptions of functionality and the subjective ways in which communities experience, interpret, and respond to such disruptions.

While sociology has long studied processes of social change, the notion of societal collapse refers to a qualitatively different phenomenon. Social change denotes the ongoing transformation of norms, institutions, and relationships through which societies adapt and reproduce themselves. It presupposes a stable social ontology—a shared understanding of what society is and how it persists. Collapse, by contrast, marks the disruption of that ontology itself: a breakdown of the institutional, symbolic, and ecological foundations that sustain collective life. In this sense, collapse represents not the culmination of change but its suspension—when the very capacity to generate order, meaning, and reproduction falters. Recent theoretical developments within eco-social and ontological approaches (Hirvilammi, Domazet, Vrdoljak, Matković, & Greselin, 2024) highlight that change and collapse must be distinguished not only by scale or intensity but by their underlying dynamics. Social change unfolds within an operative horizon of continuity, whereas collapse entails a loss of coherence, where the social, material, and normative dimensions of life fall out of alignment. Recognising this difference is crucial for a sociology of collapse: it situates collapse as a boundary condition of social life, where the capacity for adaptation gives way to disintegration.

From a Durkheimian standpoint, collapse can be conceived as the disintegration of social facts—those collective ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exert coercive power over individuals and sustain the moral fabric of society. When these shared norms, institutions, and meanings lose their external authority, social cohesion weakens, and the capacity for coordinated action erodes. In this sense, collapse represents not only a material or institutional failure but a crisis of the collective conscience itself. This Durkheimian insight provides a foundation for later sociological interpretations of systemic disruption. Sorokin's analysis of cultural disorganisation, Giddens's notion of late-modern reflexivity, and Beck's theory of the risk society each extend Durkheim's intuition that social order depends on the stability of shared meanings and normative expectations. When these social facts become unstable—when norms lose binding force or reflexivity overwhelms coherence—societies enter phases of uncertainty that may culminate in partial or generalised collapse. Attending to the fragility and reconstitution of social facts thus allows sociology to grasp how disorganisation spreads through the social body and how new moral and institutional orders may emerge from disintegration.

From a sociological perspective, it is important to distinguish collapse from related concepts such as anomie, crisis, or revolution. Anomie, in the Durkheimian sense, primarily denotes a breakdown of normative regulation within an otherwise functioning social order, whereas collapse refers to a more profound erosion of the institutional, material, and symbolic capacities required for collective life. Similarly, revolutions represent episodes of rapid and often conflictual social transformation that may lead to the reconstitution of social order, while collapse describes situations in which the very conditions for coordinated social reproduction are weakened or exhausted. Collapse therefore does not necessarily imply sudden rupture or total breakdown, but rather a processual and uneven

decline in systemic coherence, collective capacity, and social integration across social groups, institutions, and spatial scales.

A sociology of collapse therefore requires an integrative framework that bridges structure, culture, and agency. It must also remain reflexive: collapse is not only an empirical condition but a normative and political one, raising questions of justice, inequality, and responsibility. In this sense, collapse becomes both an analytic category and a public sociology, oriented toward understanding as well as guiding collective responses to contemporary crises.

3.1 Collapse as Systemic Transformation

From a sociological standpoint, collapse should not be equated with sudden annihilation or the total disappearance of societies. Historical and contemporary cases suggest that collapse more often involves partial, uneven, and transformative processes. Political orders disintegrate while cultural practices endure; economic systems collapse while communities reorganise in new forms. In this sense, collapse can be seen as a reconfiguration of social systems under duress, rather than as their absolute end.

Carter (2013) advances this view by proposing a sociological model of collapse. Rather than treating collapse as a deterministic endpoint, he emphasises the interaction of demographic pressures, institutional legitimacy, power relations, and cultural cohesion. Collapse occurs when these interdependent domains lose their capacity to reinforce one another, producing systemic transformation that alters the very fabric of social order.

This conception aligns with resilience theory in acknowledging that collapse is not necessarily terminal but can open pathways for reorganisation. Yet it also sharpens the analysis by foregrounding inequality and power: transformations are rarely neutral, and they create winners and losers. Some groups may adapt through resource control or institutional capture, while others experience dispossession or marginalisation. For sociology, then, collapse as systemic transformation is not only about adaptive cycles but about contested processes of redistribution, legitimacy, and meaning-making.

3.2 Collapse as Loss

If systemic transformation emphasises the structural reconfiguration of societies, a complementary perspective highlights the experience of loss. Rebecca Elliott (2018) argues that sociology has too often framed climate change and ecological crisis in terms of “sustainability” or “resilience,” thereby overlooking the profound disappearances, depletions, and dispossessions that crises entail. A sociology of collapse must therefore be attentive not only to what persists or adapts, but to what is irretrievably lost.

Loss operates across multiple registers. Materially, collapse entails the disappearance of ecosystems, species, territories, and infrastructures. Socially, it produces dispossession of livelihoods, displacement of communities, and the erosion of solidarities. Culturally, it involves the loss of traditions, identities, and forms of meaning that cannot easily be reconstructed once disrupted. Such losses are not abstract: they are embodied in grief, mourning, and uncertainty about the future.

Importantly, losses are unevenly distributed. Collapse often intensifies existing inequalities, with marginalised communities bearing the brunt of dispossession and displacement. Climate-induced migration, for example, disproportionately affects populations with the least resources to adapt, while elites may shield themselves through mobility, gated resilience, or privileged access to secure environments. From a sociological standpoint, collapse as loss thus foregrounds questions of justice and inequality: whose losses are recognised, whose are ignored, and who has the power to narrate and memorialise them.

By framing collapse through loss, sociology also opens space for examining the cultural and emotional dimensions of decline. Grief and mourning are not only private experiences but collective ones, shaping political mobilisation, memory, and resistance. In this sense, the sociology of loss links collapse to the sociology of emotions and culture, showing that the end of worlds is not only a matter of systemic failure but also of lived experience and collective meaning-making.

At the same time, the sociology of loss inevitably gestures toward its counterpart—the sociology of hope. As Scribano (2024) argues, hope is not a naïve sentiment but a *practice of feeling* that organises the horizon of the possible. Whereas collapse reveals the dissolution of meaning, hope sustains the affective and cognitive conditions for imagining renewal. Drawing on Bloch's notion of the *principle of hope* and Freire's idea of its "ontological necessity," the sociology of hope situates anticipation, imagination, and collective agency within the same emotional ecology as grief and mourning (Scribano, 2024). Hope, in this sense, is a sociological resource: it mediates between loss and action, between despair and the capacity to rebuild social life. Rather than opposing collapse, it coexists with it as a dialectical counterforce—an affective reservoir through which communities articulate futures beyond disintegration. Integrating the sociology of hope thus allows collapse studies to account not only for the endings of worlds, but also for the sensibilities and solidarities that make new ones conceivable.

3.3 Collapse as Reduction of Collective Capacity

Another way of conceptualising collapse is as the erosion of a society's collective capacity to sustain basic functions. Steel et al. (2024) propose a dynamic definition of collapse as the loss of the social, political, and material capacities that enable communities to secure water, food, shelter, health, and governance. In this sense, collapse is not defined by spectacular events or total disappearance, but by the cumulative reduction of functional capacity to the point where societies can no longer provide for their members in reliable ways.

This approach has two important implications. First, it distinguishes collapse from transformation. A green energy transition, for instance, may radically alter infrastructures and economies, but it does not necessarily signify collapse if collective capacity to provide life-supporting functions is maintained or even enhanced. By contrast, droughts that undermine food security, pandemics that overwhelm health systems, or wars that dismantle governance infrastructures illustrate collapse in the sense of capacity loss, even

if not all institutions disappear. Recent socio-ecological research on the COVID-19 pandemic underscores this point by showing that pandemic responses functioned as systemic stress tests rather than merely temporary biomedical crises. Comparative analyses suggest that societal capacity to cope with COVID-19 depended not only on healthcare infrastructure or policy measures, but also on deeper cultural and social conditions such as trust, solidarity, and patterns of socio-ecological organisation, revealing how short-term adaptive success may coexist with longer-term structural vulnerabilities (Ančić, Puđak, Domazet, & Cik, 2025).

Second, this perspective emphasises process over event. Collapse unfolds as a trajectory in which institutional effectiveness, infrastructural robustness, and social cohesion gradually erode until they reach thresholds of dysfunction that are difficult to reverse. The breakdown of collective capacity may occur unevenly: elites and privileged groups may retain access to security and resources long after poorer or peripheral populations experience collapse-like conditions.

For sociology, conceiving collapse as reduced capacity foregrounds the lived inequalities of systemic breakdown. The inability of states or institutions to maintain essential goods and services is not experienced uniformly, but stratified by class, race, gender, and geography. In this sense, collapse is not only about system failure but about differentiated vulnerability, where some groups face premature collapse while others sustain insulated enclaves of resilience.

3.4 Collapse as Relational and Multi-Scalar

Collapse is often imagined as the disintegration of discrete societies, yet sociological perspectives stress that no community exists in isolation. Collapse is inherently relational and multi-scalar, unfolding across local, national, and global levels simultaneously. It is shaped not only by internal dynamics but also by interdependencies with other societies, institutions, and ecosystems.

World-systems theorists (Arrighi, 1994; Wallerstein, 1974) highlight this relational dimension by showing how the decline of hegemonic powers is conditioned by their position within global hierarchies of trade, finance, and warfare. Carter's (2013) sociological model similarly stresses that collapse cannot be understood without situating societies in wider networks of demographic, cultural, and geopolitical exchange. These approaches caution against framing collapse as a purely internal failure; instead, it is the outcome of interlocking processes across multiple scales.

Sorokin's (1957) triadic formulation of sociology—personality, society, and culture—offers a useful lens for grasping this multi-scalar quality. Collapse disrupts all three dimensions: at the level of personality, it unsettles individual lives and identities; at the level of society, it undermines institutions and collective organisation; at the level of culture, it destabilises the value systems and symbolic orders that sustain coherence. These disruptions are not isolated but interconnected, producing feedback loops that reverberate across scales.

For sociology, this perspective underscores that collapse is not a bounded event but a networked and layered process. Local breakdowns may ripple into global crises, as with financial contagion or climate-induced migration, while global shocks can fragment communities and identities at the most intimate scales. To analyse collapse adequately, sociology must therefore integrate multiple levels of analysis, tracing how transformations cascade across systems of vastly different size and complexity.

3.5 Collapse as Normative and Political

Collapse is not a neutral process: it is always entangled with questions of power, justice, and inequality. From a sociological perspective, the key issue is not only whether societies collapse, but *for whom* they collapse, *who* is made resilient, and *at what cost*.

Climate change offers a stark example. Rising sea levels, extreme weather, and ecosystem degradation disproportionately affect marginalised communities—often in the Global South—who contribute least to greenhouse gas emissions yet suffer the greatest losses. Wealthier populations, by contrast, may insulate themselves through technological fixes, gated resilience, or mobility, effectively outsourcing collapse to others. As Malm and Hornborg (2014) argue, the dominant Anthropocene narrative often obscures these asymmetries by framing humanity as a homogeneous geological agent, thereby concealing the historical and structural inequalities through which some societies externalise environmental costs onto others. What appears as resilience at the centre may in fact rely on the collapse of peripheral groups.

This asymmetry highlights that collapse is not merely a systemic trajectory but a political process of distribution. As Motesharrei et al.'s HANDY model (2014) suggests, elite overconsumption and concentration of wealth can drive collapse even when ecological resources remain sufficient. Collapse, in this sense, is not simply the exhaustion of material systems but the exhaustion of legitimacy when inequalities become unsustainable. Normatively, the sociology of collapse must therefore ask: *resilience for whom, collapse for whom?* To treat resilience as an unqualified good risks obscuring how it can perpetuate injustice. A state that secures its own survival through militarised borders while abandoning climate refugees may be resilient in a narrow sense, but it does so by externalising collapse onto others.

For sociology, then, collapse is inseparable from ethical and political concerns. It forces reflection on how societies allocate risks and losses, whose futures are protected, and whose are sacrificed. In this way, the sociology of collapse converges with debates in environmental justice, inequality, and global governance, emphasising that collapse is not only about systemic fragility but about the politics of vulnerability and survival.

3.6 Collapse as Public Sociology

Finally, a sociology of collapse must also be understood as a public sociology. As Burawoy (2005) and Gans (2002) argue, public sociology is less a distinct subfield than an orientation: it engages with pressing social issues, communicates beyond academic au-

diences, and fosters reflexive public debate. Collapse is precisely such an issue. It cannot remain confined to scholarly theorising but must be articulated in ways that inform policy, mobilise communities, and resonate with wider publics (Burawoy et al., 2004). This orientation entails both risks and responsibilities. On the one hand, discourses of collapse can provoke fatalism, apocalypticism, or political paralysis; on the other, they can catalyse reflection, solidarity, and transformative action. A sociology of collapse must therefore tread carefully—neither sensationalising collapse as inevitable doom nor minimising the structural vulnerabilities that societies face (Beck, 1999; O'Brien, 2012). Instead, it should cultivate reflexive awareness of multiple possible trajectories—disintegration, adaptation, and renewal—and of the social struggles that determine which prevail.

Public sociology also highlights the performative power of collapse discourse itself. Narratives of decline and renewal shape collective imaginaries, influence policy priorities, and mobilise social movements (Servigne & Stevens, 2020a; Urry, 2016). By analysing and participating in these narratives, sociologists can help redirect them from deterministic despair toward critical hope: the recognition that even amid breakdown, new forms of solidarity, justice, and meaning can emerge.

In this sense, a sociology of collapse is not only a science of systemic decline but also a practice of public reflection. It calls on sociologists to engage with publics and policymakers, to foreground justice in discussions of resilience, and to expand collective imagination beyond denial or apocalypse (Mills, 1959). In doing so, it situates itself at the heart of contemporary debates on how societies confront their most pressing crises. Taken together, these six dimensions outline the contours of a sociology of collapse. Collapse must be seen as systemic transformation—often partial and uneven rather than total disappearance; as loss, encompassing the erosion of worlds, livelihoods, and identities; and as the reduction of collective capacity, when institutions can no longer secure basic needs. It is inherently relational and multi-scalar, unfolding across networks that link individuals, societies, and global systems, while remaining deeply normative and political, raising urgent questions of justice, inequality, and responsibility. Finally, it demands a commitment to public sociology, engaging not only academics but wider publics in reflexive dialogue about possible futures.

By weaving together these perspectives, a sociology of collapse moves beyond ecological determinism, institutional reductionism, or abstract systemic modelling. It grounds collapse in the lived experiences of individuals and communities, the cultural frameworks that sustain meaning, and the political struggles that determine who bears the costs of decline and who benefits from resilience. In this way, the sociology of collapse is not only an analytic framework but also a reflexive civic practice—a way of helping societies navigate their most profound uncertainties. In sociological terms, collapse can be understood as the process through which the norms, institutions, and symbolic orders that sustain collective life lose coherence, leading to the disintegration of social facts and the erosion of collective capacities for meaning and coordinated action.

4. CONCLUSION: FOUNDATIONS FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF COLLAPSE

Collapse has often been treated as a marginal or speculative theme, confined to archaeology, history, or ecology. Yet in the twenty-first century, it has become impossible to ignore. Climate change, biodiversity loss, financial crises, pandemics, and geopolitical instability have made the spectre of collapse part of both everyday debate and scholarly inquiry. While other disciplines have developed robust frameworks for understanding collapse, sociology has lagged in systematically addressing it. This article has argued that collapse must now be recognised as a sociological problem in its own right—one that demands conceptualisation not only as material breakdown but also as a social process of disruption, interpretation, and transformation.

The survey of theoretical traditions demonstrates the breadth of perspectives brought to bear on collapse. Ecological and environmental approaches highlight the non-negotiable role of natural limits but risk determinism when they neglect agency and adaptation. Institutional and geopolitical theories emphasise legitimacy, complexity, and the fragility of power, yet often underplay cultural meaning and systemic interdependence. Biophysical and systemic perspectives reveal the dynamics of overshoot, socio-metabolic constraints, and tipping points, while acceleration and risk-oriented frameworks underscore the speed, connectivity, and reflexivity of modern crises. Finally, cultural and civilisational theories remind us that collapse also involves the exhaustion of symbolic orders and the erosion of value systems that sustain collective coherence. Together, these traditions reveal that collapse cannot be reduced to any single explanatory domain.

Against this background, the sociology of collapse offers a distinct contribution. It brings to the forefront questions of inequality, power, and lived experience—dimensions often obscured in ecological or systemic models. In sum, collapse must be understood as systemic transformation that is partial, uneven, and contested; as loss encompassing not only material scarcity but also dispossession, grief, and the disappearance of cultural worlds; and as the reduction of collective capacity, when institutions can no longer secure the basic conditions of life. It is relational and multi-scalar, unfolding across individuals, societies, and global networks, and it is deeply normative and political, marked by asymmetries of resilience and vulnerability. Finally, collapse must be treated as a site for public sociology: not only an academic subject but a terrain of cultural imagination, civic reflection, and democratic contestation.

This orientation also highlights the ethical and political stakes. Collapse is never experienced equally. Those with fewer resources, weaker political representation, or more precarious livelihoods are consistently the most exposed to systemic breakdowns, while elites often insulate themselves within enclaves of resilience or externalise risks onto others. To study collapse without acknowledging these disparities risks reproducing the very injustices that collapse exacerbates. A sociology of collapse must therefore be inherently normative, confronting questions of responsibility and justice while resisting both fatalism and complacency. At the same time, it must remain epistemically

reflexive: sociology—rooted in modernity’s own categories of progress, development, and rational order—must open itself to broader, transdisciplinary conversations with anthropology, ecology, philosophy, and futures studies. The challenge is not to abandon sociology but to stretch its boundaries so that it can illuminate emergent forms of social life at the edge of systemic disintegration.

The sociology of collapse also points toward a research agenda. Empirically, it calls for comparative studies of how collapse dynamics unfold in contemporary settings, from fragile states to climate-vulnerable communities. Theoretically, it demands refinement of sociological models that integrate demographic pressures, legitimacy crises, inequality, and cultural meaning alongside ecological and systemic variables. Culturally, it must examine how collapse is imagined, narrated, and contested in public discourse. And publicly, it must reaffirm sociology’s civic vocation: to foster collective reflection and help societies navigate uncertainty by clarifying both risks and possibilities. Methodologically, a sociology of collapse must integrate comparative-historical analysis, systems modelling, and interpretive approaches to meaning and legitimacy. It requires bridging quantitative indicators of systemic strain with qualitative understandings of how communities experience and narrate decline.

The analytical relevance of this conceptualisation can be briefly illustrated by historical processes such as the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe. Rather than constituting a sudden or uniform breakdown, this transformation involved a prolonged erosion of institutional capacity, economic security, and social trust, unevenly distributed across social groups and regions. While new political and economic orders eventually emerged, the collapse was experienced by many as a loss of collective guarantees, social protection, and predictable life trajectories. This example underscores how collapse, as understood here, refers not merely to regime change, but to a broader destabilisation of the social conditions necessary for coordinated collective life.

At the most fundamental level, studying collapse sociologically means attending to the fate of social facts themselves—the collective norms, institutions, and moral bonds that make social life possible. When these facts lose their coherence or legitimacy, societies enter states of disorganisation that no ecological or economic model alone can explain. Collapse thus becomes a uniquely sociological object: it reveals, in negative form, the conditions of social order by exposing their fragility. To examine collapse is therefore to study society at its limit, where the binding force of the collective conscience falters and new configurations of meaning and solidarity must emerge.

Ultimately, collapse should be understood not only as a danger but also as a horizon of transformation. It signals disintegration, yet it may also open pathways toward reorganisation, renewal, and the reconfiguration of values and institutions. A sociology of collapse provides the tools to interpret crises in their full complexity, to illuminate the social struggles and cultural processes that shape their outcomes, and to expand our imagination beyond the binary of denial and apocalypse. In doing so, it affirms sociology’s enduring role as both a science of systemic transformation and a practice of public responsibility in an age of profound uncertainty.

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KOLAPSI PRED NAMA: TEMELJI ZA SOCIOLOGIJU KOLAPSA

Branko Ančić

Sažetak

Kolaps je dugo bio predmet proučavanja u arheologiji, povijesti i ekologiji, no sociologija ga još uvijek nije sustavno obradila kao zaseban društveni proces. Ovaj rad postavlja temelje za sociologiju kolapsa sintetizirajući glavna teorijska tumačenja—od ekološkog determinizma i civilizacijskih ciklusa do sistemske teorije, teorije rizika i teorije akceleracije—te redefinira kolaps kao dezintegraciju društvenih činjenica, legitimiteta i kolektivnih kapaciteta. Umjesto da se kolaps promatra kao iznenadno nastalo konačno stanje, on se konceptualizira kao višedimenzionalan proces sistemske transformacije koji uključuje materijalno propadanje, gubitak i reorganizaciju. U radu se izdvaja šest međusobno povezanih socioloških dimenzija kolapsa: (1) sistemska transformacija i rekonfiguracija institucija; (2) gubitak materijalnih, kulturnih i afektivnih sujeta; (3) erozija kolektivnog kapaciteta za održavanje ključnih društvenih funkcija; (4) relacijska i višerazinska međuovisnost kriza; (5) normativne i političke nejednakosti koje određuju tko doživljava kolaps, a tko postiže otpornost; te (6) potreba za reflektivnom i javnom sociologijom koja se angažira u diskursu kolapsa kao dijagnostičkoj i građanskoj praksi. Smještajući kolaps u šire rasprave o otpornosti, planetarnim granicama i pravednosti, vidljivo je da kolaps, u negativnom obliku, razotkriva krhkost društvenih činjenica koje tvore kolektivni život. Sociologija kolapsa stoga pokazuje kako društva interpretiraju i reagiraju na sistemske krize—te kako se mogućnosti obnove, solidarnosti i moralne rekonstrukcije pojavljuju usred dezintegracije.

Ključne riječi: kolaps, otpornost, sistemski rizik, nejednakost, javna sociologija

KOLLAPSE VORAUSS: GRUNDLAGEN FÜR EINE SOZIOLOGIE DES KOLLAPSES

Branko Ančić

Zusammenfassung

Der Kollaps wird seit langem in der Archäologie, Geschichte und Ökologie untersucht, doch die Soziologie hat ihn bislang noch nicht systematisch als eigenständigen sozialen Prozess behandelt. Dieser Beitrag legt den Grundstein für eine Soziologie des Kollapses, indem er wichtige Erklärungsansätze – vom ökologischen Determinismus über Zivilisationszyklen bis hin zu System-, Risiko- und Beschleunigungstheorien – zusammenführt und den Kollaps als Zerfall sozialer Tatsachen, Legitimität und kollektiver Handlungsfähigkeit neu definiert. Anstatt den Kollaps als plötzlichen Endzustand zu betrachten, wird er als multidimensionaler Prozess systemischer Transformation konzeptualisiert, der den materiellen Zusammenbruch, Verlust und die Reorganisation umfasst. Der Artikel identifiziert sechs miteinander verbundene soziologische Dimensionen des Kollapses: (1) systemische Transformation und die Neukonfiguration von Institutionen; (2) Verlust materieller, kultureller und affektiver Welten; (3) Erosion der kollektiven Fähigkeit, wesentliche Funktionen aufrechtzuerhalten; (4) relationale und multiskalare Interdependenz von Krisen; (5) normative und politische Ungleichheiten, die bestimmen, wer den Kollaps erlebt und wer Resilienz erlangt; und (6) die Notwendigkeit einer reflexiven und öffentlichen Soziologie, die sich mit dem Kollapsdiskurs sowohl als Diagnose als auch als bürgerliche Praxis auseinandersetzt. Indem der Kollaps in einen breiteren Kontext von Debatten über Resilienz, planetare Grenzen und Gerechtigkeit eingebettet wird, argumentiert der Beitrag, dass der Kollaps in negativer Form die Fragilität der sozialen Tatsachen offenbart, die das kollektive Leben ausmachen. Eine Soziologie des Kollapses beleuchtet somit, wie Gesellschaften systemische Störungen interpretieren und darauf reagieren – und wie sich inmitten des Zerfalls Möglichkeiten für Erneuerung, Solidarität und moralischen Wiederaufbau ergeben.

Schlüsselwörter: Kollaps, Resilienz, systemisches Risiko, Ungleichheit, öffentliche Soziologie