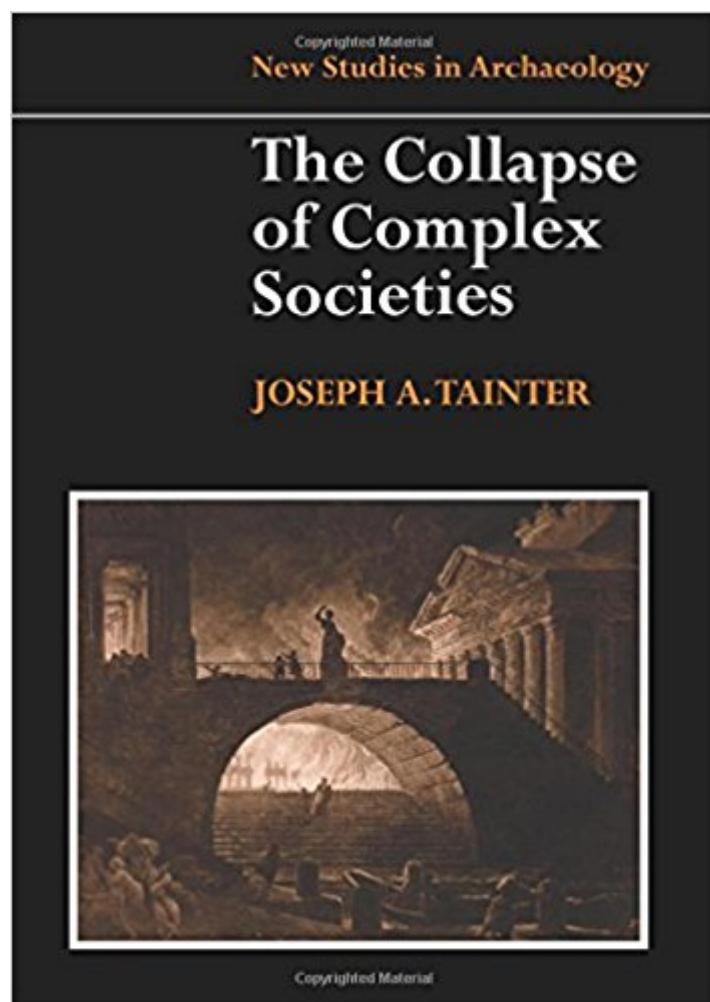


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The Collapse Of Complex Societies (New Studies In Archaeology)



Synopsis

Political disintegration is a persistent feature of world history. The Collapse of Complex Societies, though written by an archaeologist, will therefore strike a chord throughout the social sciences. Any explanation of societal collapse carries lessons not just for the study of ancient societies, but for the members of all such societies in both the present and future. Dr. Tainter describes nearly two dozen cases of collapse and reviews more than 2000 years of explanations. He then develops a new and far-reaching theory that accounts for collapse among diverse kinds of societies, evaluating his model and clarifying the processes of disintegration by detailed studies of the Roman, Mayan and Chacoan collapses.

Book Information

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Tainter's project here is to articulate his grand unifying theory to explain the strange and disturbing fact that every complex civilisation the world has ever seen has collapsed. Tainter first elegantly disposes of the usual theories of social decline (disappearance of natural resources, invasions of barbarians, etc). He then lays out his theory of decline: as societies become more complex, the costs of meeting new challenges increase, until there comes a point where extra resources devoted to meeting new challenges produce diminishing and then negative returns. At this point, societies become less complex (they collapse into smaller societies). For Tainter, social problems are always (ultimately) a problem of recruiting enough energy to "fuel" the increasing social complexity which is necessary to solve ever-newer problems. Complexity, writes Tainter, describes a variety of

characteristics in a number of societies. Some aspects of complexity include many differentiated social roles, a large class of administrators not involved in the production of primary resources, energy devoted to different kinds of communication, centralised government, etc. Societies become more complex in order to solve problems. Complexity, for Tainter, is quantifiable. Where, for example, the Cherokee natives of the U.S. had about 5,000 cultural artifacts (things ranging from recipes to tools to tents) which were integral to their culture, the Allied troops landing on the Normandy coast in 1944 had about 40,000. Herein, however, lies the rub. Since, as Tainter writes, the "number of challenges with which the Universe can confront a society is, for practical purposes, infinite," complex societies need to keep on increasing their level of complexity in order to survive new challenges.

What I found interesting about Joseph Tainter's treatise on civilizations is his application of economic theory to explain how they collapse. After a methodical review the two basic theories of why civilizations develop in the first place, the integration theory and the conflict theory, he launches into why he thinks economics is useful: it explains marginal returns. In simple terms, societies are machines for solving social problems. As problems become more difficult, solutions become more complicated, eating into resources. Eventually, all societies are faced with marginal returns on their investment. Economics is a study of how supply meets demand and management of scarce resources. Tainter begins by exploring the two concepts of civilization. Actually, it really does not matter whether you subscribe to the integration theory or the conflict theory. Economics helps explain complexity. Screw drivers exist because hammers weren't enough. Power drills were eventually developed and so on. Societies created such things as cash because lugging things around to exchange slowed commerce. Eventually, monetary policies developed to both explain transactions and allow regulation and taxation. Taxation pays for society. Here is where the two theories on civilization diverge. Integration theory proposes that societies become more complex because of a growth in people's wants and needs. Conflict theory says that societies exist because an upper class wants to control the output of society to further their own comfort and avarice. Personally, I agree with Tainter that neither theory works, although many societies I've read about, including our own can lean in one of these directions or another. Tainter agrees that economic theory cannot explain everything.

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