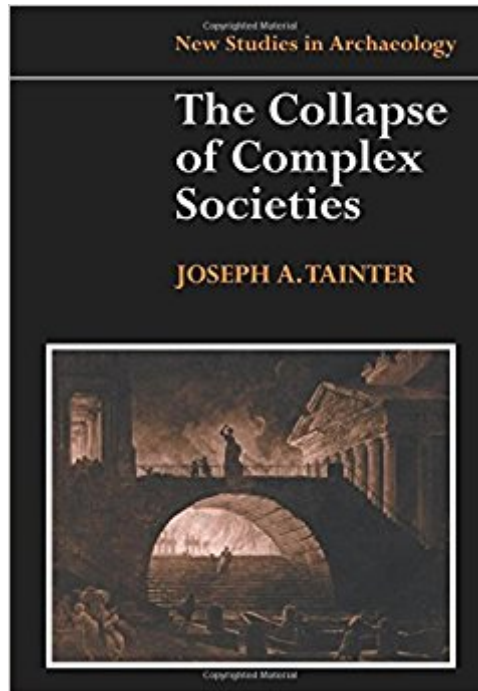




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The Collapse Of Complex Societies (New Studies In Archaeology)



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

Series: New Studies in Archaeology

Paperback: 264 pages

Publisher: Cambridge University Press; Reprint edition (March 30, 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 052138673X

ISBN-13: 978-0521386739

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.6 x 9.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 67 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #177,752 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #128 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Archaeology](#) #311 in [Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Archaeology](#) #344 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Ancient](#)

Customer Reviews

"While the theoretical part of the book is quite remarkable and based on exceptional erudition, I also found the accumulation of the supporting data to be interesting reading . . . The merit of the book is that it is interesting. It modifies some of our views about early states and their collapse mainly by using data. It also shows how archaeology in alliance with social sciences opens the way for a comparative analysis of change in political and other cultural institutions." *European Cultural Heritage*"Tainter's is an attractive and compelling thesis of a genre which is nearly extinct among domestic historians." *History Today*"This is a lucid and stimulating book. Tainter does provide a framework for organizing and evaluating the evidence of collapse. One of the strengths of his framework is the broadness of its terms of reference...Tainter's model accomodates all levels of

complexity and all kinds of evidence, from fiscal policy to the acquisition of raw materials. It deserves to be widely read." Antiquity "Tainter has provided copious grist for the intellectual mill in this remarkable piece of scholarship. The breadth of its coverage is given order by a model that qualifies, I believe, as one of the covering laws archaeologists have sought. In addition, Old World and New World scholars alike can profit from a reading of this book." P. Nick Kardulias, *American Journal of Archaeology* "The Collapse of Complex Societies contains much useful historical and archeological information on empires that have abruptly disappeared." James B. Rule, SUNY, Stony Brook, in *Population and Environment* "The book is thought-provoking, engaging, and often witty, and well illustrates the relevancy of classical antiquity to contemporary concerns." *Classical World*

Twenty-four examples of societal collapse help develop a new theory to account for their breakdown. Detailed studies of the Roman, Mayan and Cacoan collapses clarify the processes of disintegration.

It's an interesting study on complexity, its meaning and nature. The author makes a review of different theories of breakdown of societies and then, he tried to build his own proposal, with interesting outcomes. The theory is believable in relation to Western Roman Empire and Mayan States, but not with Chacoans. The most provocative idea is that complexity, by itself, it's not an advantage and, in some cases, can be the cause of breakdown. The idea of Tainter must be applied to other cases to see its usefulness.

Tainter explains decline using a well-known economic law, the law of diminishing returns. However, the argument is not malthusian, but framed in the science of complexity: as a society gets more and more complex, the return of additional investments in complexity is decreasing and eventually can become negative; when weakened by this complexity burden, society are more fragile and can fall under contingent attacks of various sort. Very well written and documented, I particularly enjoyed the account of the fall of the Roman empire based on this theory. Tainter also makes a good job in comparing his theory with other explanation of decline or society collapse, showing why some common approaches are actually flawed (e.g. when decline is due to an external shock, or cultural explanation based on the decline of fundamental values in society).

This book was definitely worth the Kindle Price. The first thing is that the Table of contexts (and index) were beautifully organized so that the reader can go back and reread some of the parts that

need rereading. (The argument had many parts and so some parts did need rereading.) The second thing is that the prose was not excessively wordy (only a couple of hundred pages of what could have turned into 500 pages). He gave us a broad overview of MANY societies that have come and gone in the very first chapter. Whenever someone is talking about societal collapse, they invariably use the Roman Empire. This author seems to give credit where credit is due (i.e., societies that have existed for some number of hundreds of years and then vanished without a trace and for no reason). The author seems to pick up where Jared Diamond left off in *Guns, Germs and Steel*. In fact, he says that same thing that Diamond does about the four levels of society (Band-->Tribe-->Chiefdom-->State), but he takes a great many more words to say the *same* thing. (A chart really would be enough to summarize the whole second chapter--"Complexity"). One thing that is interesting is that he goes over SO many different societies and presents SO many different, independent theories for collapse that it is hard to know which specific one to believe. Cullen Murphy (*Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*) mentions that there are over 200 different theories for the collapse of the Roman Empire alone. But something that he doesn't get into (that Tainter DOES get into) is the difficulty of even establishing what happened. Even for societies one which he spends one paragraph, he cites references to several competing theories. Tainter dispatches several theories as to why societies have collapsed (resource depletion/ natural disasters/ mystical/ moralizing explanations). But the overall assumption that he seems to work with is that just because a theory works in some places but not in others that it is useless. If one treats societies as complex (in the sense that they are like a fuzzy set), then of course some set of circumstances will not act in a predictable way and yet it MIGHT be enough to explain the outcome. (Prostate cancer may kill one patient but not another.) Ultimately, I'll have to call the book "impressionistic."¹ None of the cases that he worked with were well documented enough to understand every single factor that went into their makeup. (He didn't exhaustively go into the demographics, resource endowments, geography, etc. of every single empire-- both for brevity and likely because such information was not forthcoming.) And so the author was left with trying to test various theories against incomplete data sets.² Even if the data sets had been complete, it still would not have been enough to demonstrate the theory because each of these empires only happened one time. It's not like the experiments could be run dozens of times to work out every aspect of every theory.³ Even during the time that I am reading the book, I am inventing different theories that the author did not go over/ bring up. How do know that *those* theories weren't the case? (For example: What if not every emperor is as technically proficient as the last? How many inept administrators can an empire withstand? And remember that anthropologists are not

mathematically/ statistically inclined people who would try to build models to test something like that.)4. For that matter, with all the confounding variables surrounding the societies themselves....does it make any sense to try to find any systematic explanation at all for the collapse?5. The author does get into the Roman Empire (what else?) and draws some parallels between then and many extant countries (currency debasement/ increased demands for social services/ punitive tax rates), but then Vaclav Smil (Why America Is Not a New Rome) has made an excellent case that Rome and the United States (at least) are far from the same thing. It's worth the time for the intellectual exercise, and can give you some nice talking points. Also, if you like to read books about the history of certain societies (I've read a fair amount about China, having lived here for long), you can interpolate some of his explanations to the Chinese case and see how well they work. That all said, I am not sure how conclusive it is (his use of the phrase "Summary and Implications" at the end of each chapter is a propos). And again, to restate: I am not sure that a problem like this (i.e., coming up with the reasons for the collapse of complex civilizations) can really be solved. 1. The variables are non-linear; 2. The data about the countries (centuries and centuries ago) are incomplete; 3. It is hard to know if one country is comparable to another; 4. With so many variables, it is hard to know if the same "country" can ever exist twice. And if it can't, then what is the point of any such attempt at prediction?

This may be the first theoretical treatment of complex society collapse across multiple geographies and ethnicities; certainly it is one of the most well known. Applies the basic theory to the southern Maya, the American southwest, the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley, ancient Rome and ancient Egypt, Mycenaean civilization, and Mesopotamia. Tainter could have gone one step farther by considering separable ROI trajectories for different components of a complex society. This is how deflationary high tech companies manage to keep growing despite a 15 year maximum lifespan/ROI curve for a particular technology set. But that would require a second book. Perhaps he's written it and I just don't know it.

Tainter understands that people will always try to solve problems but that often the solutions they derive put us farther and farther into an energy and resource deficit until society can no longer extricate itself from the downward spiral. If only people could see that the same things done by ancient societies are being done today around the world perhaps we would have some chance of avoiding the same perils.

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