The Collapse of Complex Societies


my own thoughts will be in italics

1. Introduction to Collapse

"The image of lost civilizations is compelling: cities buried by drifting sands or tangled jungle, ruin and desolation where once there were people and abundance. Surely few persons can read such descriptions and not sense awe and mystery. Invariably we are spellbound, and want to know more. Who were these people and, particularly, what happened to them?" p. 1

Good summary of this phenomena and why people are so curious. Many other authors allude to this aspect too. Can cite them with this as part of intro but need to find a fresh twist or new hook for it.

Check out publication by Wilamowitz and publication by Mazzarino on the collapse of the Roman Empire

"To some historians of the early twentieth century the twilight of Rome seemed almost a page of contemporary history (Mazzarino 1966: 173; Casson 1937: 183)." p.2

Link this to discussions of the study of the archaeological record as a colonizing treatment of the medieval. See "The Erasure of the Middle Ages from Anthropology's Intellectual Genealogy"

"Were it not for this well-documented example of a powerful empire disintegrating, to which every Western school child is exposed, the fear of collapse would certainly be less widespread." p.2

The quote is in reference to the Roman Empire. Interesting to consider how the concept of Collapse and its applications would be viewed in other non-Western areas of thinking.

Why study collapse?

--most outstanding event in human history (see also Isaac 1971) (scientific interest)

--topic of widespread concern and social significance (social ramifications)

suggests that some believe that modern societies are less vulnerable than ancient ones...would be interesting to explore if this is true or could be true if anthropology were applied--on that note, it would be interesting to see how anthropology has been applied to the issue of collapse outside environmental issues. Mentions disintegration of the social order often expressed in a religious idiom. Any exploration in other places of archaeology's addition to discussion on trend toward secularism or globalization as a collapse of a previous order? Or at least decline/transformation?

Modern day groups associated with collapse

survivalists

environmentalists

no-growth advocates

nuclear-freeze proponents

What does complexity equal? Scale, specialization/compartmentalization

"Explanations of collapse have tended to be ad hoc pertaining only to one or a few societies, so that a general understanding remains elusive." p.3

Chart of collapse will illustrate the underlying biases for ad hoc nature, but may also help create a more general understanding?

IN 1988 NO UNIVERSAL, RELIABLE EXPLANATION OF COLLAPSE. Chart definitions and explanations of collapse through time

*** "Collapse, as viewed in the present work, is a political process. It may, and often does, have consequences in such areas as economics, art, and literature, but it is fundamentally a matter of the sociopolitical sphere. A society has collapsed when it displays a rapid, significant loss of an established level of sociopolitical complexity. The term 'established level' is important. To qualify as an instance of collapse a society must have been at, or developing toward, a level of complexity for more than one or two generations. The demise of the Carolingian Empire, thus, is not a case of collapse - merely an unsuccessful attempt at empire building. The collapse, in turn, must be rapid - taking no more than a few decades -
and must entail a substantial loss of sociopolitical structure. Losses that are less severe, or take longer to occur, are to be considered cases of weakness and decline." p.4. Add weakness and decline to list of things to differentiate; how does this issue of loss relate to Foucault's assertion that institutions can only lose power, because their job is to maintain the political status quo?

Tainter provides examples of how collapse manifests which seem to be mainly tied to my idea of what a loss of complexity would mean (smaller scale, less specialization) BUT if one accepts that alternative forms of organization exist, such as heterarchy, how could one possibly distinguish between a collapse (loss) and a transformation (no loss, just change)? If for example one elite group's power is reorganized into three equal groups of power with no more or less control or restrictions than the one group is it collapse or transformation? Does the group's power collapse, but the institution of power is transformed?

"Collapse is a general process that is not restricted to any type of society or level of complexity." YES!

Is a continuous scale the best analogy for societal complexity? Still a bit close to progressive stages... maybe it's just in the definition of complexity

Collapse relative to the society in which it occurs

"To the extent, moreover, that the collapses of simpler societies can be understood by general principles, they are no less illuminating than the fall of nations and empires. Any explanation of collapse that purports to have general potential should help us to understand the full spectrum of its manifestations, from the simplest to the most complex." p.5. YES! Paleolithic and Medieval Men were all created equal! ok, just equally comparable... taking into account scale

List of Collapsed Societies

Western Chou dynasty (collapsed over 200 years) breakdown of system
Harappan Civilization (collapsed over 650 years) breakdown of system, seemingly internal
Mesopotamia, Third Dynasty of Ur (perhaps previous collapse with first empire of Sargon of Akkad?) (over a millennium?) collapse of southern Mesopotamia possibly internal while northern Hammurabi empire terminated by external Hittite forces; Mesopotamians possibly integrated collapse after Cyrus the Great?; multiple collapses in Mesopotamia; factors: political, economic, environmental collapse led to other collapses
Assyrians collapsed around 1780, period resurgency of political power; final collapse in 614 due to outside forces
Old Kingdom Egypt collapsed at the end of the Sixth Dynasty (over 50 years)
Hittite Empire decline over the 13th century strain allowed external forces to affect them, civilization also collapsed
Minoan Civilization 1500 environmental catastrophe led to internal and external forces that caused total collapse by 1380
Mycenaean Civilization (collapsed over 200 years)
Western Roman Empire (western section over 100 years, including decline of the whole empire over 4 centuries)
Olmec
Lowland Classic Maya (collapsed over 150 years)
Mesoamerican Highlands: Teotihuacan, Tula, Monte Alban
Teotihuacan collapsed in 700 AD (abrupt)
Monte Alban collapsed in 7th century AD
Tula collapsed between 1150-1200 AD
Casas Grandes collapsed around 1340 AD
Chacoans collapse over 250 year period
Mimbres
Jornada
Hohokam collapsed during 15th century AD
Eastern Woodlands: Hopewell and Mississippian
Hopewell collapsed by 400 AD
Mississippian decline after 1250 AD
Huari and Tiahuanaco both collapse by 1000/1100 AD
The Kachin social structure collapse?

Ik possible societal collapse? (this section seems a bit desperate, must read more other sources on Ik, also they do not seem to fit Tainter’s definition of complex or collapse as political structure?

empirical collapse of modern empires does not necessarily equal collapse of the home society

the fundamental question behind collapse for many is whether civilization is an inherent trait or a social construct, do people tend towards utopia or Lord of the Flies, good v evil?

what are the implications of defining a culture as collapsed? At least with the Ik example, but there may be hints in some of the other examples, collapse could lead to the ultimate collapse of humanity (human decency)? is this bias implicated in the language or the cultures defined as collapse?

post-apocalyptic literature tropes

Characteristics of Societies after Collapse based off Renfrew 1979

a breakdown of authority and central control

   loss of prominence and power at former political center
   small, petty states emerge in the formerly unified territory really? what if the central area shifts completely? or there is political collapse and reorganization but the territory stays the same? power just shifts to other centers within the same territory?
   lawlessness may prevail for a time is peaceful collapse impossible? The Glorious Revolution in England?
   no new construction in urban/political centers but adaptions of existing buildings
   decline/collapse of redistribution network and craft specialization; decline in regional interaction
   typically a marked, rapid reduction in population size and density

overarching structure loses capabilities; organization reduces to lower level sustainable (why LOWEST level, why not lower?)

"For such people collapse has surely led to a survival-of-the-fittest situation” p. 20. Dude, survival-of-the-fittest doesn't disappear with civilization many of this collapses resulted or were fueled by shifts to feudalism. what is this relationship and does it if so, how relate to the relationship between heterarchy and hierarchy?

in order to successfully define collapse must define its parameters...“height” of power beginning of collapse, how do we detect/define the end?

to what extent does collapse have to encompass all types of collapse (environmental, social, political, economic) Tainter addresses this by defining collapse as political but is there a different, more encompassing way? would it be better to look at each aspect of collapse in the chart?

Chapter 2: The nature of complex societies

collapse can only be understood in relation to the question of appearance and rise true, ok, but often this is within the society studied aka can’t understand the fall of Rome without understanding the rise of Rome/basis of civilization; might it not be just as interesting/fruitful to look at the collapse and the RISE of what followed? knowing what replaced it helps us understand what changes may have taken place

"Complexity is generally understood to refer to such things as the size of a society, the number and distinctiveness of its parts, the variety of specialized social roles that it incorporates, the number of distinct social personalities present, and the variety of mechanisms for organizing these into a coherent, functioning whole.” p. 20

a heterogenic society that has increasingly less equal distribution across parts is increasingly complex

inequality and heterogeneity are interrelated but not always correlated do I agree with this?

what are the “building blocks” of complexity?

States:
territorially organized
ruling authority monopolizes sovereignty and delegates power
professional ruling class
common, society-wide ideology exists to validate political org.
social cat., strat, and specl result from larger populous
do NOT ordinarily undergo short-term cycles of formation and dissolution
organic solidarity (via Durkheim)
focused on a center
"The features that set states apart...are: territorial organization, differentiation by class and occupation rather than by kinship, monopoly of force, authority to mobilize resources and personnel, and legal jurisdiction." p. 29
"Supernatural sanctions are then a response to the stresses of change from a kin-based society to a class-structured one." but...shamanism? this concept of sacred legitimation seems to be highly based off modern day analogy. surely sacred legitimation doesn't disappear just because someone gets an army organized
"Some anthropologists, for example, have suggests that drops in complexity within a level (such as the state level) are not instances of collapse, but 'waxings and wanings of scale' (B. Price 1977: 218)." p. 29
some typologize societies on complexity (Service) others put complexity on a continuous scale (Fried) others argue that the only useful categorization is between states and other kinds of societies
"Webb, for example, uses the term conditional state to describe complex, fairly durable chiefdoms that are like states, but never achieve a true monopoly of force....never fully complete the transformation "Webb 1975: 163-4)." p. 30
critique: calles into question how necessary a monopoly of force really is
Claessen and Skalnik (1978, Claessen 1978) also distinguish different state types
Inchoate Early State: kinship, family and community dominate political relations; limited full-time spec., ad hoc taxation, reciprocity and direct contacts between ruler and ruled
Typical Early state: kinship factors into political relations but also ties to locality, competition, and appointment; leading roles given to non-kinsmen, redistribution and reciprocity dominate relations
Transitional Early State: kinship only affects marginal aspects of government (so not Chicago politics then); appointed officials, market economies, and clashing social classes; private ownership of production means
Critique: calls into question the disappearance of kinship
"there are apparently continuities int he transition from tribal to state" perhaps its better to argue that there CAN be continuities and it would be interesting to look at under what circumstances those continuities occur vs. don't
"Collapse is a process of decline in complexity" p 31 too pedantic to argue that decline suggests that the change is somehow bad and it's better to say decrease?
how would one characterize the change from hierarchical to heterarchical? is it more or less complex? does this raise questions about the efficacy of using concepts such as amount of complexity to talk about change?
Collapse doesn't necessarily result in a total shift in political organization--may simply shift to a smaller version at hand and doesn't just happen to states--these changes are obscured by typological approaches that only define differences between levels

Theories on the Origin of States (conflict vs. integration)
1. Managerial--stress and population increase require hierarchies to organize and control distribution of goods and services
2. Internal Conflict--class conflict leads to elite individuals wanting to protect their privileged, restricted access
3. External Conflict--conquering of outside groups gives elites capital and/or requires institutions to manage outside people
4. Synthetic--interrelated processes generate complexity and institutions this is not a theory, just a general description of what happens

argues that Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Indus, Mexico, and Peru are the only primary states. So primary states are just the first instance of states in a region--but ones that didn't previously interact with other known states (thereby negating the development of a pristine state in Europe)
how does the development of these states compare to the development of all secondary states? should include this in table

Social Theory on the thought look at general literature on the purpose of civil society
CONFLICT THEORIES view the emergence of states as a result of the needs/wants of certain individuals and groups and therefore has a divided interest; the states role is to maintain and manage the conflicting interests

INTEGRATION/FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES states rose to med the needs of society: a. shared interests; common advantages and not dominance/exploitation; c. consensus vs. coercion

“Can it be that the fulfillment of individual ambition, in certain contexts, has society-wide benefits”? p. 36

Conflict theory's biggest problem is psychological reductionism

argues for a combination approach that leans towards integration but fundamentally sees the state as a problem-solving organization

Chapter 3—The Study of Collapse

the study of collapse is a statement of current political philosophy good thing to take into account

collapse as defined by the fall of POLITICAL entities vs collapse as defined by the transformation of civilizations' cultural forms

Sorokin's 1957 critique points out that there is often continuity from one dying civilization to an emerging one and that since cultural systems have aspects that continuously change it's difficult to pinpoint which aspects matter and when a system has collapsed vs. changed

civilization=the cultural system of a complex society

"For this reason the study of rising and falling complexity serves as a monitor of the phenomenon termed civilization, a monitor that is at once measurable and specifiable, and so less subject to the biases and value judgements of other approaches." p. 41

Themes of collapse

1. Depletion or cessation of (a) vital resource(s) (gradual deterioration vs. rapid loss due to climatic shift)–just because a resource depletes does not mean it will collapse but depends on society's response
   a. Southern Lowland Maya; Olmec; Highland; Tula; Teotihuacan
   b. Chimú
   c. Hohokam
   d. Hopewell; Mississippian
   e. Old Kingdom
   f. Harrapan
   g. Mesopotamia (Sassanian and Islamic periods)
   h. Mycenaeans
   i. Roman Empire
2. The establishment of a new resource base; integration school
   a. South American foragers
   b. horticultural villages along Pecos River
   c. Mycenaeans; Hittites
   d. Chou
3. The occurrence of some insurmountable catastrophe; simplistic explanation
   a. Mayan; Teotihuacan
   b. Minoans
   c. Roman Empire
4. insufficient response to circumstances—Tainter finds this one favorable, but in a sense all of these could be characterized as an insufficient response to the circumstances—the rest of this list are circumstances this one is the characterization of the response
   a. Maya; Teotihuacan; Tula
   b. Cahokia
   c. Chaco; Mimbres
   d. Old Babylonian period; Middle Uruk
   e. Ming China
   f. Chalcolithic India
   g. Roman Empire
   h. Aztec; Inca
5. other complex societies
   a. Huari; Tiahuanaco
   b. Teotihuacan; Monte Alban
6. intruders
   a. Mayan; Teotihuacan; Tula
   b. Anasazi
   c. Huari; Tiahuanaco
   d. Harrapan
e. Mesopotamia  
f. Hittites  
g. Minoans  
h. Mycenaeans  
i. Romans  
j. China  

7. class conflict, societal contradictions, elite mismanagement or misbehavior  
a. Mayan; Teotihuacan; Monte Alban  
b. Huari  
c. China  
d. Old Babylonian period; Akkad; Ur; neo-Assyrian  
e. Roman Empire; Byzantine Empire; Spanish Empireal Decline; 18th c. Dutch  
f. Harrapans  
g. Easter Island  

8. social dysfunction--"societies collapse due to mysterious internal processes whose nature cannot be specified" helpful  
a. Pueblo  

9. mystical factors--ranks societies in terms of concepts like decadence, vigor, senility  
a. Mayans  
b. Hopewell  

10. chance concatenation of events--this one is merely stating that no single circumstance on this list might be a cause  
a. Roman; Byzantium  
b. Maya  
c. Egypt  

11. economic factors--declining advantages of complexity; increasing disadvantages of complexity; increasing costliness of complexity  
a. Ottoman Empire  
b. China  
c. Sassanians  
d. Mayan; Valley of Oaxaca  
e. Ik  

explanations of resource depletion, catastrophes, intruders, and insufficient response all recognize a need to identify internal factors of weakness  
most discussion of collapses does not go beyond an individual society to do comparative work  

all civilizations collapse as a result of their response to a situation whether that response fails to "save" the system from collapse or the response is to collapse; collapse and it's favorability is also view dependent--is there a way to incorporate this into a theory  

Tainter points out that we cannot conclude or assume that societies are inherently fragile or static so the question is what is the goal of a society in a system--to maintain stability? but stability of what? stability of the society's identity as seen by others?  

"One is either an impartial social scientist or a social critic, and the latter should not masquerade as the former." p. 84  
"exploitation is a normal cost of stratification...bad government is a normal cost of government" p. 72  

Chapter 4–Understand collapse: the marginal productivity of sociopolitical change  

"1. human societies are problem-solving organizations; 2. sociopolitical systems require energy for their maintenance; 3. increased complexity carries with it increased costs per capita; and 4. investment in sociopolitical complexity as a problem-solving response often reaches a point of declining marginal returns." p.93  

"Gregory Johnson (1982) has shown graphically that as the size of a social group increases, the communication load increases even faster." p. 99  

"Thus, lacking dependence on such energy sources as fossil fuels, the limited technical development of which the ancient world was capable, and the extensive territorial expansion for which it is noted, could only provide a temporary respite from declining marginal productivity." p.126  

Chapter 5: Evaluation: complexity and marginal returns in collapsing societies  

"the ideal way to evaluate this model would be to isolate and quantify the costs and benefits of various instances of social complexity, and to plot changes in these costs and benefits through time." p. 127  
p.130 nice map of the Roman Empire at the time of Hadrian  

Roman economy overwhelmingly agricultural with 9-% of government revenue dependent on it  

p. 181 good map of Chacoan regional system AD 1050  

Conclusions
“In each of the cases examined, the costliness of complexity increased over time while benefits to the population declined. In each case, substantially increased costs occurred late, shortly before the collapse, and these were imposed on a population already weakened by the previous pattern of declining marginal returns...Rome’s collapse was due to the excessive costs imposed on an agricultural population to maintain a far-flung empire in a hostile environment.” p.191

Chapter 6: Summary and implications

“A complex society that has collapsed is suddenly smaller, simpler, less stratified, and less socially differentiated.” p.193

“Complex societies, such as states, are not a discrete stage in cultural evolution. Each society represents a point along a continuum from least to most complex.” p. 193

“A less biased approach must be not only to study elites and their creations, but also to acquire information on the producing segments of complex societies that continue, if in reduced numbers, after collapse.” p.198

Declining marginal returns arise from the following conditions: 1. benefits constant, costs rising; 2. benefits rising, costs rising faster; 3. benefits falling, costs constant; or 4. benefits falling, costs rising. p. 205