

Beyond Collapse: Archaeological Perspectives on Resilience, Revitalization, and Transformation of Complex Societies [book review]

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Abstract:

This edited volume is the product of Carbondale's Visiting Scholar Conference Series. This eclectic collection of 20 chapters considers the collapse and resilience of complex societies. I group the papers thematically since space prohibits a description of each.

The editor organized the conference twenty-five years after the publication of two foundational works: *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) by Joseph Tainter and *The Collapse of Ancient States and Civilizations* (University of Arizona Press, 1991), edited by Norman Yoffee and George Cowgill. The first two chapters review previous research in different ways. Tainter examines the history of thought about collapse in the Western world and how this bias may have had an impact on archaeological approaches. Fauseit reviews many of these approaches but details resilience theory (RT), a model derived from environmental science, which examines change as an adaptive cycle.

Keywords: book review | resilience theory | archaeology

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

potential for working with published data in order to provide a larger-scale analysis. With the establishment of the tDAR Southwest mortuary data compilation (www.tdar.org), more studies like this one will be possible.

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Beyond Collapse: Archaeological Perspectives on Resilience, Revitalization, and Transformation in Complex Societies. Ronald K. Fauseit, ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016, 552 pp. \$70.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-8093-3399-8.

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RT proposes that an adaptive cycle has four phases: exploitation (r), conservation (K), release or collapse (Ω), and reorganization (α). This model incorporates other concepts, such as panarchy, political versus social resilience, and rigidity traps, which some authors take up in their papers rather than accepting the whole RT package. This may be because RT resembles systems theory. Among other similarities, RT treats societies as closed systems (Feinman and Nicholas) and uses the concept of "equilibrium" in a somewhat functionalist manner.

The adaptive cycle of RT is plotted on a "figure-eight recurring loop" with the x -axis measuring connectedness and the y -axis representing potential. The model associates "exploitation" with low connectedness and rising potential, "conservation" with high connectedness and stable or declining potential, "release" with falling connectedness and potential, and "reorganization" with growing potential and low connectedness. Thus, a system is resilient when potential is high and connectedness is low, but it becomes unstable and susceptible to collapse as key elements of the system become more interconnected and interdependent. RT also assumes that col-

lapse is triggered by outside factors or stresses (e.g., drought, flooding) rather than internal processes (e.g., class conflict, factional disputes). Overconnectedness results in a “rigidity trap” that may hinder an appropriate reaction to disaster. This concept recalls Flannery’s *hypercoherence* or Renfrew’s *cuspid catastrophe*. The model’s predictions seem to oppose Gil Stein’s ideas regarding segmentary versus unitary polities, in which segmentary states are often weak, lose segments, or disintegrate for lack of interdependence, and unitary states that have codependent parts exhibit more longevity and are less prone to collapse. As several contributors suggest, resilience theory requires careful consideration before it is applied to cultural studies.

A few of the authors examine the predictive power of RT; however, the only paper that seems to support the proposed sequence describes how some ideological tenants in Han China coupled with poor environmental management created a rigidity trap, which resulted in a brief political collapse (Kidder et al.). For the most part, authors found problems with the model. For instance, Storey and Storey compare transformations resulting from the collapse of the Roman Empire and polities in the Maya lowlands. They find RT overly simplistic and inadequate for modeling the processes of decline and its possible outcomes. Likewise, Emerson and Hedman find that Cahokia was not depopulated as a result of diet stress or climatic factors. They attribute change to factional differences among a diverse population in the urban center. Iannone presents data from the Khmer Empire of Cambodia and the Burmese Empire of Myanmar. He finds that change may proceed in a different sequence than that which RT predicts. Similarly, Pool and Loughlin suggest that reorganization may have occurred at the Olmec site of Tres Zapotes without “release.”

Several authors reject RT as a package but find heuristic value in some of the associated concepts (e.g., chapters by Conlee, Iannone, Pool and Loughlin). Among them is panarchy, the idea that phenomena such as political regimes, religion, ideology, social organization, and other institutions in a society change at different rates. In general, it is presumed that political affairs transform more quickly than cosmology or the configuration of the household.

Chapters by other authors explore different models, such as historical processualism proposed by Pauketat (*Anthropological Theory* 1:73–98, 2001), Bennet Bronson’s stimulus vs. template regeneration, historical ecology, and political economy (e.g., chapters by Hutson et al., Thompson, Rodning and Mehta, Meyers). The final section of the book includes several interesting case studies describing the aftermath of collapse (chapters by Sharratt, Anderson et al., Lantzas, Zabler and Sutter, Hogarth and Awe). Ideas abound in this diverse collection of papers, which demonstrates more research is needed on the collapse, resilience, and transformation of complex societies.