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COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF COLLAPSE


Just from the title, one would think this book to be as relevant to the concerns of this Society as a book might possibly be. It is a collection of papers from a 1982 seminar, six of them case studies of particular states or civilizations, the other five addressing the subjects of collapse and of agents that might cause it. In practice the book is not quite so useful as one might hope, from one another. The recorded interplay between presenters such as occurs in our book The Boundaries of Civilizations in Space and Time is absent from this volume, except insofar as later revisions by individual authors note the other papers. Nevertheless the book remains a good study of the nearly current thought on the subject, particularly for the specific areas under discussion.

The introductory chapter could have been designed to provoke civilizationists’ thoughts on the subject both of decline and of collapse:

Since it is apparent that the political systems of ancient civilizations did collapse and that these collapses did not follow a common trajectory or proceed to the same level of breakdown, we need not only to explain these instances of social change, but also to develop a methodology for their comparative examination. In this introductory chapter, I present a digest of studies that have considered the problem of collapse.

These begin with Spengler, whom he considers less a scientist than an artist in metaphors - “the whole speculative superstructure rests on the flimsiest of empirical foundations” and so discusses very briefly. Toynbee is dismissed almost as curtly, though I would disagree with part of the objection: “Although Toynbee seems to have thought that the breakdown of civilizations is not irreversible, [for him] ancient civilizations were caught in a historical web of inevitable - emphasis] . This inevitability is quite true, as stage in the metastasis of the collapse (presumably sometime before the onset of what Toynbee calls “universal states”, though he is admittedly unclear about when probability becomes inevitability). But this does not mean that all breakdowns are permanent - Toynbee discusses several successful “responses” in ancient times before “challenges” occurred that were not successfully met - or that modern civilizations are immune to such inevitability; the nomination of universal states in such empires as Muscovite Russia and Tokugawa Japan places them on just the same footing as the
ancient collapses. Other theorists addressed include Roy Rappaport, Elam Service, Robert Dunnell, Kent Flannery, Colin Renfrew, Karl Butzer, and Herbert Simon, most of them with particular applications of system theory. These evoke a general objection.

One general problem with each of these system analyses is that they tend to encourage us to assume that sociocultural entities are normally highly integrated - highly systemic - with well-developed mechanisms for self regulation. Terms such as promotion, linearization, and near-decomposability are probably not "wrong" - and may well serve as starters for organizing hard thinking about ideas and data. Nevertheless, the vague language and terminology of systems theory, and used by archaeologists and other social scientists, tends [sic] to invite increasingly elaborate abstractions that often impede our ability to break down complex data and may prevent the examination of social institutions that are normally not well integrated.

His own suggestion is decidedly less abstract:

Collapse, in general, ensues when the center is no longer able to secure resources from the periphery, usually having lost the "legitimacy" through which it could "disembed" goods and services of traditionally organized groups. The process of collapse entails the dissolution of those centralized institutions that had facilitated the transmission of resources and information, the settlement of intragroup disputes, and the legitimate expression of differentiated organizational components.

This formulation employs the basic idea that states and civilizations are characterized by centralization, which I have elsewhere suggested to be untenable on grounds of such milieus as the European Early Middle Ages ["The State. Organized Progressor Decay Product?" Comparative Civilizations Review 21 (Fall 1989): 20-46]. Such "Middle Ages" are universally admitted to be periods of developing civilization and yet show only the most centralization. But Yoffee's proposal would continue to apply to the collapses of centralization, particularly among those universal empires (such as Rome and Han China) which are so often used as examples of early states.

Next come the more specialized studies, which reasonably reflect scholarly opinion as recently as the mid-1980s. Robert Adams and Norman Yoffee present studies of Mesopotamian civilization. Adams emphasizes the role of cities, first as city-states during the Sumerian-Akkadian period, then as centers of Babylonian culture, such that collapse" means of the urban centers. This is not quite as universal a phenomenon as he claims; Assyria, quite as much part of Mesopotamia as its southern neighbor, was much more Assyrian kings could shift their capitals from one site to another with no regard for hallowed traditional claims. This attitude would have been unthinkable in the polity centered around Babylon. In support of this urban
focus. Adams notes a change toward an increasingly pessimistic appreciation of life in the second millennium BC. The other analysis, by Yoffee, shares with many others an unacknowledged debt to the Chinese mechanic of the dynastic cycle; for example, the Old Babylonian kingdom of Hammurabi and overstrained its resources and, instead of cutting back, continued to retain the old order as long as possible. The Assyrian Empire, on the other hand, fell beyond recovery because most of its fighting population was killed off in wars and replaced by non-Assyrians who had no interest in resurrecting the old system under their own control. A comparison with the same situation in Roman Italy would be interesting. The study does leave one important question hanging: “When the militaristic Assyrian and Babylonian ‘national’ states, themselves creative responses to changing circumstances in Western Asia, were vanquished in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., no longer was any characteristic Mesopotamian political reformulation possible. Why not? The Sumerian civilization was based on the idea of individual gods ruling individual city-states, and this was successfully reformulated after the Amorite (barbarian) conquests of the early second millennium BC such that these god—city partnerships became focussed on a ruling city (Babylon) or a ruling people (the Assyrians). Why could no such reformulation have occurred during the many periods of weakness soon to follow among the conquerors of the first millennium BC? The implication is that these conquests destroyed all the carriers of the old culture, and this seems unparalleled. Egypt for example was conquered repeatedly beginning ca.500 BC, and its culture clearly lasted for another thousand years in some form; medieval Russia was subjugated by the Mongols into just as tolerant a regime as was created by the Persians, and restored itself quite effectively centuries later; Jewish culture has survived for millennia under foreign rule. One must suspect there is something more involved here.

The next two studies are of Mesoamerica, Patrick Culbert’s on the Maya, Rene Millon’s on Teotihuacan. Culbert’s study seems to this reviewer the best in the book; it is full of detail and covers both the changes of opinion in the field over the last few decades and the various possible interpretations of the presently accepted data. Millon’s is rather more unilinear, presenting ion of the possible nature of this ancient Mexican metropolis, but does not pretend to be anything like final: In three consecutive lines one finds the verbs “thought to have been,” “appear to have been” and “may have come”. The agency of collapse proposed for Teotihuacan seems to this reviewer perhaps the oddest ever postulated. While Millon would probably not agree with the interpretation, he seems to propose that the city was the physical realization of a social contract, and when the contractors became dissatisfied because of internal problems with the arrangement, they broke the physical
symbol (the city) and threw it away (abandoned it, for the most part). This seems a bit disturbing; societies are not supposed to be deliberately broken ant thrown away by their participants, at least not without a familiar replacement ready to hand, and no replacement is postulated for Teotihuacan. Still, there are instances on record of imperial ruling classes succumbing to barbarian faddism, as in late Rome and Later Han. Perhaps if Rome had been conquered by such oppressed lower-class people as formed the roving peasant bandit gangs called the Bacaudae, some phenomenon comparable to deliberate destruction and abandonment of an establish capital would have occurred.

G.W. Bowersock next addresses “The Dissolution of the Roman Empire,” expounding a recently popular hypothesis that Rome never did really fall, it merely mutated into something else something that involved the break-up of the empire, a severe reduction of urban population, reversion to manorialism, severe reduction or loss of a money economy, and other things that must properly be considered only adaptations to new conditions. This ion implies that post-Roman Europe, commonly called “barbarian Europe,” should be held equally civilized as Rome itself, or at least that a “fall” is no more than an ad which should not be held to affect people’s level of civilization. Why this should be so is not addressed. Such interpretation must further imply that the collapses of such universal empires do not entail the ends of their civilizations. At least in the case of Rome, the transition to one or more different civilizations (medieval: Western, Byzantine ...) would seem fairly well accepted. Thus the article seems to present a case whose acceptance would create drastic implications, and these implications are made as prior assumptions rather than being discussed or addressed. But within that caveat, this is a good expusition of the “not fall but change” hypothesis as any.

Next is Cho—yun Hsu’s “The Roles of the Literati and of Regionalism in the Fall of the Han Dynasty”. Here the final suggestion is quite remarkable. The general deterioration of Han effective rule, however, had started at the time of purges against the literati (A.D.166-176). In A.D. 178 Tung Cho took advantage of the anarchy created by factional conflicts between the pro-literati bureaucrats and the anti-literati courtiers and eunuchs which was an extension of the cleavage between these groups. The Yellow Turban revolt was one of the symptoms of the loss of effective governance by the Han order. It was hardly a cause of the fall..... In Han China by the beginning of the third century A.D., the Confucian elite had lost interest in participation in the national bureaucracy, and thus China remained disunited.

The other cause of decline is also associated with the literati, to the effect that the system of promotion among the scholar—bureaucrats made for the appearance of regional factions. This analysis would seem to
overstress the importance of the scholarly elite, particularly in such an early period as the Han. The Confucian literati have been, particularly in their own eyes, a central group in the development of traditional China, especially since Ming times, but I have nowhere else seen the collapse of Han attributed to a failure in literati support. It also seems questionable in light of the circumstances in which the literati lived. Hsu notes that elite status and the income of the literati. It is well known, as Hsu asserts, that particularly in Later Han the government officials were using their positions and their incomes to create landed estates, which became the focus of the post—Han manorialism. Hsu’s implication seems to be that when the purges the literati simply abandoned their connections in the capital and became full-time local lords, which position proved ended and new military governments were created, the former literati refused to come back again. And this lack of experienced personnel was enough to break Han apart and see that it was not re-assembled. When Hsu proposes that the literati refused to return to office, the implication is that they were called upon to do so. And indeed one must suspect that the new military rulers needed capable administrative personnel at least as much as had any previous government, and they particularly needed capable personnel who as civilians could be trusted not to revolt as soon as they were out of sight of the capital. If the literati were in fact so useful, they would have been importuned and/or blackmailed into government service at top speed support us with your services or your family loses those estates. No such efforts at coercion are noted. This implies either that the literati simply were not useful in that way any longer, that their governmental training had lapsed and their ability to legitimize had lapsed with it, or, possibly, that the literati had become immune to such attempts at coercion, i.e. that they could fight back, and with enough force that the central government would be more endangered than strengthened by the effort. There are in fact reports that during Later Han these new local lords were marshalling their dependents into private armies, a most un-Confucian practice but one well known in similar situations elsewhere (the later Roman Empire, for example). Thus it would seem that when the former literati class moved their base of support from the central government to rural private estates, they were subsumed into local lords who paid careful attention to their own military backing, a situation in which Confucian standards of behavior would have been much more a hindrance than an aid to success. This would further imply that Confucian standards and legitimacy had been collapsing as the Later Han dynasty aged. Thus it is at least a tenable hypothesis that Later Han did not dissolve because of a failure of support by Confucian legitimists. Rather, under this hypothesis, there were no, or very few, legitimist Confucians left by the end of Later Han. Standards of
elite status had changed. The problem would then become the reasons for this change, and beyond the question of land accumulation, Hsu does not address any questions of changes in the relationship between Confucianism and the supposed Confucians in Later Han.

The book next has two article Bennet Bronson discusses "The Role of Barbarians in the Fall of States, in so concise and lucid a fashion that a few excerpts from the article will serve to illuminate its contents:

Observers agree that falling states have problems with restive local magnates and corrupt bureaucrats. But is this not usually true of states on the rise? Consider the evidence of Pepys' diary on the state of officialdom in late seventeenth-century England - are many kingdoms in the last stages of decay more corruptly and inefficiently governed than England on the way to becoming a world power? ... How about China in the Southern Sung period, just before the Mongol conquest, or Byzantium in the dark days of the early fifteenth century? Were their governments then more incompetent or venal than in earlier and happier years? ... I am not arguing that bad government is irrelevant but that it is (1) difficult to measure and (2), whenever we look at strictly contemporary documents rather than the moralizing works of later commentators, not at all clearly associated with declines and falls...

[On the borders of the Roman Empire] through social mechanisms that are not quite clear (charismatic religious propaganda and cultist elite units played a part), a number of the Frontier tribes routinely fielded raiding parties that were equal in size to a Roman legion. When, as occasionally happened, several tribes formed an alliance, their combined forces were not inferior to the full armies of most known premodern states. This is is an exceptional case, to be sure. Yet it serves to give emphasis to the general point toward which the present arguments have been building: that barbarian military capabilities may in some circumstances be so formidable as to explain the fall of states without reference to those states' internal conditions. The conventional wisdom is erroneous: the theoretical advantage of central over noncentralized polities is neither invariable nor insuperable. Given the right barbarians in sufficient numbers, it is plausible that even the best—organized and least—senescent of states could be overthrown...

In direct evidence, however, suggests that barbarians with decisive power over the survival of states are not all that rare. The ability of the Mongols and Arabs to overthrow states almost at will is matched by a number of less well documented barbarian successes.

[He looks next at a case in the Philippines, involving not a fall but a failure ever to form in the first place.] The point here is not that the Luzon barbarians destroyed any states but that they appear to have been powerful enough to prevent their rise, in one of the best locations for a state in all of Asia. The case is similar to that of the Deli Plain: despite their apparent locational and ecological advantages, both areas suffered the disadvantages of a narrow indefensible shape and a very extensive and easily defended barbarian hinterland...
The hostile outsiders who are almost certainly present during any political dissolution could in the case of an internally caused decline be no more than spectators or minor participants. On the other hand, they could be the main cause of symptoms of decline. Altogether there are four possible causal roles that outsiders can play [vultures: pure scavengers - jackals: scavengers that kill the weak - wolves: hunters that harry the weak into victims - and tigers. Like the Mongols . . . .}
Is the seizure of power by barbarians any more fatal to a state than a rebellion or coup d'etat? I believe that it often is. . . . As shown by Theodoric's Ostrogoths and the various, other invaders of Rome, a lack of administrative talent and/or will is to be expected in even the most ardently admiring of barbarian conquerors. This is by itself is enough to explain the close empirical association between conquests by barbarians and the falls of states.

Next Herbert Kaufman presents a theoretical study of collapse as a feedback reaction, in which a government exploiting to the full the revenues of good times finds itself in hard times to adapt its expenditures accordingly. The various measures taken to extract the same revenue from a smaller base weaken the economic system progressively until it collapses. But the study is much too speculative, with no evidence presented; for example, he discusses possible restorations of the previous good times as follows:

In some instances, the extraordinary leaders [whose efforts restructured the situation] proved to be the founders or rejuvenators of dynasties that lasted for generations. Chances are that reversing the downward trend in the system started an upward spiral from which their successors benefited. At any rate, the positive effects continued past their lifetimes.

The proposal has a long history - one may suppose the Chinese dynastic cycle to be much the same idea - but is not presented with enough detail in this instance to be more than suggestive.

Shmuel Eisenstaat's Beyond Collapse is less a paper than a preface, a prolonged emphasis that states and civilizations are complex assemblies of subsystems and must be understood in terms of developments and interactions of these subsystems. It concludes with a statement akin to Gordon Hewes's recent paper on "Anticivilization" that there exists within any society the possibility that "antisystems" may develop.... Although potentialities of conflict and change are inherent in all human societies, the directions of change, including collapse, differ greatly according to the specific constellation of institutional forces outlined above. That is, different coalitions of elites, the social divisions of labor, and the specific international and ecological settings of societies allow us to see some regularities in social change. "Collapse," thus, is likely to be one possible kind of change, particularly plausible in those societies in which the differentiation among social groups is relatively small and the major elites are embedded in ascriptive groups. In contrast, in ancient states and civilizations the degree of differentiation is relatively large and the major elites do not owe their status exclusively to their position within any single ascriptive group . . . .

Of special interest in this regard is the distinction between the older "ancient civilizations" (e.g. Mesopotamia, Maya, Teotihuacan, as represented in this volume) and those called by Karl Jaspers "Axial Aged civilizations (the Roman and Han examples in this volume). In the former, pre-Axial civilizations, there was a relatively weak
distinction between the boundaries of the major institutional collectivities (that is, the carriers of religious and political institutions were not separate and autonomous), and sectarian and heterodox visions did not develop as active agents of change. Consequently, there was more of a tendency in those ancient states to disintegrate (at least partially, especially in the political system) and to lack the ability to reformulate those centralized political institutions. In the great civilizations of the Axial Age, however, collapse carries within it the seeds of likely reconstructions.

This contrast between the civilizations ca. 2000 BC and those ca. BC/AD may be a bit overdrawn; we do not know the origins of what Toynbee called the “Osirian Church” in early Egypt, and the Sumerian/Akkadian period was followed in Assyria by a mild emphasis - hardly a universalist theological reconstruction, but something - on the world—position of the moon-god Sin. But the civilizational reconstruction the end of the Axial Age were at least much more successful than earlier models.

The final essay, “Onward and Upward with Collapse” by George Cowgill, has three subjects. The first is a heartfelt cry for precision in labeling, a detailed complaint that social scientists and particularly those of us who compare civilizations have the very bad habit of borrowing both philosophical and technical terms from more solidly organized fields as if those terms were incantations, capable of providing certainty and legitimacy merely by being there. The second point is a closing look at the fragmentation of empires, with particular attention to financial stresses such as were discussed in outline by Kaufman. The third topic involve; closing thoughts on the specific cases addressed in the earlier papers (the Maya, Rome, etc.). Finally comes a coda which is worth quoting in full:

I shall mention only a few of the topics for further research suggested by the chapters in this volume. Why did some empires last 50 much longer than others? How closely is their duration connected to degrees and kinds of integration, economic and social as well as political? How do empires solve (or not solve) the problem of adequate income when fast wealth through easy conquest of rich neighbors is no longer possible? How do empires respond to crises? Why are some times of trouble fatal, whereas others are not? What orderly relations, if any, hold between fiscal troubles and developmental cycles of empires? Are there trends over time in the incidence of scoundrels or incompetents in governments? Is the incidence of either fiscal troubles or misbehavior really just as high early as late? If so, are there structural reasons why the effects of such sources of trouble are sometimes less serious, or is it simply that part of the time an empire is SO successful that it can tolerate a startling amount of systemic malfunctioning? Struggles between heads and important subordinates over accountability and autonomy seem universal, but can we identify important variables? Were certain strategies in these struggles given much greater emphasis in some instances than in others? If so, are the
differences explainable by differences in environments, technologies, and relations of production, or were differences in ideas about rules, techniques, and purposes of political activity also important?

Finally, what of the role of ideology in imperial expansion? Conrad and Demarest (1984) argue that ideologies gave the Incas and Aztecs decisive edges over their competitors. Ideology was also important in the explosive Islamic conquests of the seventh century. Other peoples, however, such as the Romans, were very successful empire builders on a much lower ideological plane, motivated less by a sense of mission than by quite pragmatic appetites for power and wealth. Was strong dependence on ideology one reason why some empires were short lived, since there may be little else to hold things together if ideological fervor wanes?

Underlying all these questions is the insistence that, if ideas are not merely epiphenomenal, we need greatly improved concepts, especially hypotheses that have withstood testing against substantial bodies of evidence, about causal connections between ideas and material phenomena.

It is obvious that this book goes very much to the heart of comparativist studies, and for that reason alone should be on a library shelf in every school at which a comparativist resides. Those of us who write papers drawing heavily on comparativist principles should also consider acquiring a personal copy.

John K Hord