

Librería
Bonilla y Asociados
desde 1950



Título:

Autor:

Precio: Desconocido

Editorial:

Año: 2009

Tema:

Edición: 9ª

Sinopsis

ISBN: 9780521386739

Any explanation of political collapse carries lessons not just for the study of ancient societies, but for the members of all complex 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.

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Acknowledgements; 1. Introduction to collapse; 2. The nature of complex societies; 3. The study of collapse; 4. Understanding collapse: the marginal productivity of sociopolitical change; 5. Evaluation: complexity and marginal returns in collapsing societies; 6. Summary and implications; References; Index.