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**From the Selected Works of Joseph A. Tainter**

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2016

# Book Review: Killing Civilization: A Reassessment of Early Urbanization and Its Consequences

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The fur trade remains important in northern aboriginal history and culture, and it strongly colors how many Subarctic and Arctic communities continue to define complex relationships with their homelands. The fur trade is not merely a historical footnote, but rather a lived reality in many contemporary aboriginal communities. This returns me to the book's greatest strength and scholarly contribution.

In keeping with Nassaney's priority to consider the fur trade and its role in the "formative experience of America," the book is framed in a critical theory perspective. He explores how the fur trade is viewed in North American popular culture and scholarship and notes that the dominant narrative reflects the European "voice," while Aboriginal perspectives are largely muted. Fur trade historiography has increasingly drawn attention to these systemic biases, and Nassaney proposes that archaeological investigation might help address them. But most substantive archaeological discussion of the fur trade remains focused on the trading post—the center of European settlement. Few historical archaeologists (myself included) have addressed the fur trade by comprehensively examining historic indigenous archaeological sites. This is a fruitful field for future enquiry, particularly in collaboration with descendent indigenous communities.

Nassaney succinctly notes that the fur trade is alternatively treated as a catalyst for European colonial exploration and imperial competition, the prelude to Manifest Destiny and the foundation of nationhood, socioeconomic integration, and an ethnic melting pot, or a lament to indigenous subjugation and continental-scale ecological disaster. His exploration of these and other interpretative themes demonstrates that what we perceive about the fur trade often reflects origin myths of modern USA and Canada. The fur trade has also been a "test bed" for scholarly consideration of processes of culture contact, diffusion, and acculturation. By leading the reader through these divergent narratives, Nassaney makes clear that critical examination and reflection is an essential part of scholarship, and that the fur trade is fertile ground for rethinking old ideas through new interpretative filters.

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*Killing Civilization: A Reassessment of Early Urbanization and Its Consequences.*

Justin Jennings. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016, 376 pp.

\$75.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8263-5660-4.

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The concept of civilization has been with us at least since the Greeks divided the world into those who lived in cities and those who didn't. It was better to live in cities and speak Greek. For at least this long the idea of civilization, if not the current term, has implied superiority. This has led to the progressivist notion (most evident

in the works of Jared Diamond) that civilization is an accomplishment, something that people strove to achieve. The various facets of civilization—cities, rulers, religion, laws, architecture, literature, and so forth—must therefore have emerged as a package.

The above is a large part of the ancestor myth of contemporary societies. In *Killing Civilization*, Justin Jennings has boldly set out to exterminate the civilization concept, at least as an evolutionary construct. Following Bruce Trigger, Jennings defines civilizations as class-based societies, organized as cities and states. Jennings's approach is to challenge the stair-step model of cultural evolution, in which civilization is the top tier. The stair-step model suggests that most aspects of cultural systems persist unchanging for long periods. There are then periods of rapid change, when constellations of characteristics change in concert, usually as part of a pattern of increasing complexity. A new period of stasis then ensues. The model is similar to punctuated equilibrium in biology.

Civilization and urbanism have long been associated, which Jennings takes as his starting point. He argues that people reacted to living in early population agglomerations by a series of adaptations. Early on, people attempted to maintain traditional egalitarian relations, accepting hierarchy only with some passage of time and changing circumstances. Hierarchy thus does not correlate with urbanism. Dense populations could not support themselves, so the formation of cities necessitated the formation of countrysides, agricultural intensification, and the development of provisioning infrastructure. This might lead to hierarchy, but other forms of organization were possible. Any such intensification process took time, and was necessary before the formation of states. Since rural production might not suffice to support urban populations, early cities developed colonial outposts. Colonization and regional interaction created the cultural horizons with which archaeologists are familiar. Regional polities came later. The key point is that these features did not emerge simultaneously in the classic stair-step formulation. They emerged sequentially as need or circumstances developed. The genius of Jennings's model is to show how the features that we consider characteristic of civilizations emerged over time as adaptations to the process of urbanization.

Much of the book consists of case studies that illustrate these processes. Jennings begins by describing the formation of several new cities, showing that their rapid early development quickly obscured their origins. One could not discern their evolution from their condition even a few decades after founding. He then proceeds to review six case studies of early aggregated settlements—Çatalhöyük, Cahokia, Harappa, Jenne-jeno, Tiahuanaco, and Monte Albán. The case studies are admirably well researched and are in some ways the strongest parts of the book. Jennings shows that the stair-step model does not fit these early cases of aggregation and/or urbanization.

The book is not without weaknesses. Parts of Jennings's interpretations of the case studies rely on inference. Any honest archaeologist knows that our finds can

always be interpreted in various ways. Some of Jennings's specific inferences may therefore be subject to dispute, and no doubt they will be. Jennings is weak on urban origins, although in fairness explaining urban origins was not his goal. His treatment of it is nonetheless disappointing. He repeatedly reduces settlement processes to choices, for which he offers no reasons. People, he writes again and again, "chose" to settle here or settle there, to aggregate, or to disperse. No further clarification is given. It is troubling to see the factors leading to a major evolutionary process dismissed as idiosyncratic choices.

Nonetheless, *Killing Civilization* is an important book and deserves to be widely read. Progressivist thought is the dominant ideology of wealthy nations today, and it occurs both in the public and among scholars. Progressivism sees civilization as the ultimate human accomplishment. The problem is that evolution does not and cannot have a purpose or direction. Moreover, the thermodynamic cost of cultural complexity must always have inhibited its development. Jennings shows that the complex societies termed civilizations emerged through a process of adaptation. The evolution of complexity was unintended and undirected.

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*Classic Maya Polities of the Southern Lowlands: Integration, Interaction, Dissolution.* Damien B. Marken and James L. Fitzsimmons, eds.

Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015, 272 pp. \$65.00, cloth.

ISBN 978-1607324126.

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Modeling Maya political systems has been a consistent debate for archaeologists working in the Southern Lowlands. As editors Damien B. Marken and James L. Fitzsimmons point out, models that emphasize the centralized vs. decentralized debate are simplistic and mask the variability that is seemingly inherent in ancient Maya political life. In their introductory chapter, the co-editors review literature on polities and point out how the model has spurred dichotomous definitions: elite/commoner, urban/rural, centralized/decentralized. Although these terms may serve as heuristic devices, they do not capture the dynamism and variability that archaeologists encounter in material remains. In his contribution, Fitzsimmons admits discomfort with the term "polity" because it conceals the wide range of relationships that go into forming and maintaining political, social, and economic communities, and that the term can be more useful if unpacked. Throughout the book's ten chapters, the authors argue that we need to understand how the building blocks of polities articulated with one another and how internal identities and political organization operated in the Maya lowlands. To do this the authors successfully present