This thesis looks primarily at the work of Joseph Tainter, and in particular his book *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. It treats speculative philosophy of history and the comparative research on civilisations as inter-related research fields. It breaks new ground by studying Tainter’s contribution to the philosophy of history, and makes out a case for his enduring importance as a writer on civilisation. The author utilises major secondary sources, as well as personal correspondence with Tainter himself.

This is a highly erudite work which wears its erudition lightly. It is very clearly argued. There is a critical mind at work, whether the author is taking on Tainter’s critics or questioning whether a complex society approach delivers the advantages it promises.

I am much more familiar with the study of civilisation than I am with the philosophy of history, and so I will largely confine my remarks to the former. But I am willing to accept the author’s insistence (p29) that philosophers of history are more modest than they were in the past in formulating – or at least claiming to formulate – only ‘general statements about the world’. The candidate has chosen to nail his colours to this mast, and to argue the case for civilisation as a valid subject for the philosophy of history, rather than a subset of social philosophy or history (in the sense that Fernand Braudel argued back in the 1960s when defending the term as a ‘useful concept’ to denote a social and cultural life with its own distinctive rhythms and cycles of growth and a shared cultural inheritance). Whether the ideas of complexity and sustainability can be folded into the philosophy of history (pp89-94) is a matter on which I don’t feel qualified to judge.
Civilisation is a wonderful example of a ‘contested concept’: it accredits some kind of valued judgement though it’s not always clear what is being valued. As a concept it always begs the question: what is ‘civilised’ about it? It allows more variations of judgement in this respect than the notion of society, for we can discuss the stability or viability of a particular society without necessarily asking whether it is especially sociable. And doesn’t the word civilisation encourage us to trash the achievements of others (their artistic representations/architectural styles)? Doesn’t it encourage us to distrust ‘otherness’ and identify what is considered to be ‘savage’ or ‘barbaric’ and even be insensitive to the plight of our less fortunate citizens who we – and they – may feel are not exactly part of the civilisation that is being celebrated.

At the heart of any discussion of civilisation, as the author acknowledges, is the problem of whether we are talking about ‘civilisation’ in the round, or ‘a particular civilisation’. He mentions Freud on a couple of occasions but more could have been made of his book *Civilisation and its Discontents*. The problem of course is with the English translation – Freud didn’t use the word ‘civilisation’ but ‘kultur’ and for a German-speaking author the two words are very different. The second problem is that the word ‘Ungluck’ is not strictly ‘discontent’. ‘Uneasiness’ would be a better translation. Discontent and uneasiness, of course, are very different. English-speaking analysts still find themselves confounded by these terms: see Michael Ignatieff misuse of Freud’s book in his own book *Blood and Belonging* (1994) or take writers on the left who take Freud to be discussing ‘liberal civilisation’ (see Pankaj Mishra *Age of Anger* (2016)). To further complicate the issue, Zygmunt Bauman suggests the word ‘civilisation’ should actually be translated as ‘modernity’, because that is what Freud was in effect discussing. So, I think our candidate could have unpacked Freud’s terms in a way that would have illuminated his own argument.

**Complex societies:** I liked the candidate’s discussion of Tainter’s work and would direct him to some of the studies of evolutionary psychologists and socio-biologists who place much more emphasis on the concept of *hypertrophy*: the extensive development of a pre-existing structure. And the similarities between states/cities/civilisations, both agricultural and industrial, pre-modern and modern, are as striking as the many variations. They merely become more complex over time. Within that definition there are of course important distinctions: if nationalism is merely a particularly vivid example of a culturally marked outgrowth of tribalism, a tribe relies largely on kinship, a nation on affinity – on an extended family for which one is willing to die, even if one never meets its members (the famous ‘imagined community’). Incidentally, I think that this concept is as good a counter as any
to Jenning’s argument about ‘black boxing’; chieftdom societies are the main stepping stone to civilisations, and are themselves more complex than the groupings they replace.

**Complexity Breakdown:** The problem with Tainter’s work, as our author acknowledges, is that it is heavily reliant on economics, and the case studies are all pre-industrial. Unfortunately, while history offers us plenty of examples of systems failure involving the natural world (such as the sudden collapse of the Mayan ecosystem) it furnishes us with very few examples of technology collapse. Here I think the work of the Santa Fe Institute, and especially one of its luminaries John Casti, is especially illuminating. What is most concerning about our own world is its embrace of technological complexity: we assume we can go on creating ever more complex systems without incurring a cost. Casti’s main ‘takeaway’ is that we are living in the most technologically advanced society known to history and that in trying to push back the frontiers at ever-increasing speed we are sowing the seeds of our own destruction. We are heading for complexity overload.

**Tainter’s Case Studies:** I think the candidate could have been much more critical of Tainter’s case studies. I’m not in a position to make any criticism myself of this discussion of Mayan/Chaoan case studies, although I notice there is no reference in his bibliography to Charles Mann’s *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* with its extensive bibliography on recent research into pre-Columbian America. But I do know something about the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and discussion has been revolutionised by our understanding of the collapses of the first major example of globalisation: the closing of the Silk Road. If he’s discussing ‘energy capture’, then it is worth acknowledging that the collapse of the Han dynasty in China, and the contemporary dynasty in Persia, stopped the import of luxury goods into the Roman world (robbing the state of a major source of revenue which it needed to sustain military expenditure). See Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean* (2014) the candidate does need to upgrade his bibliography: I particularly recommend two books by Walter Scheidel, *State Power in ancient China and Rome* (2015) and *Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires* (2009)

He is quite right, however, to take issue with Tainter’s critics such as Bowersock, who comes from a generation of historians who taught me that the Western Empire didn’t collapse but was ‘transformed’. More recently historians have been happy enough to explain that the term
'transformation' hardly does justice to the catastrophic collapse both in living standards and the quality of life in the Western Roman world.

Discussion of Morris

I like the discussion of Ian Morris's Social Development Index and his comparative approach to civilisation. It is comprehensive and on the whole fairly balanced. One might add that those critics who claim that he overdoes the 'war-making capacity' of states might think they are borne out by his subsequent work *War: what is it good for?*. In this book he amplified the argument while concluding that war is no longer good for very much – just as in *Why the West rules for now* he explained that the East/West 'competition' which had generally fuelled the world's economic advancement is now bad for the planet's sustainable development.

Justin Jennings

I think he puts too much emphasis on this particular writer who clearly has a political agenda, but he's good at dismantling his arguments. Jennings' thesis is highly materialistic, and hardly does justice to the ideational understanding of civilisation that was so central, if not to Greek, then certainly to the Roman understanding that they lived in a shared Greco-Roman world. For all his emphasis on network analysis, there is almost no discussion in Jennings' work of cultural networking. The fact that Plato's Academy remained at the heart of the Roman philosophical tradition until it was finally closed in 529CE. Long before then neo-Platonism had made a significant contribution to early Christian theology: without it there could be no concept of a Christian god. Peter Sloterdijk makes much of this in his book *Philosophical Temperaments*. This doesn't of course preclude civilisations borrowing from each other: so Greek mathematics is these days seen as partly Greco-Babylonian, just as twelfth century European philosophy is seen as Greek-Arab. And of course the Romans borrowed more from the Greeks than their philosophy. They copied their literary forms such as epic and lyric poetry. Indeed Latin translations of Greek works like *The Iliad* enabled the Romans to 'network' the Mediterranean world. Dennis Feeney has gone so far as to describe this process as the very first appearance of a 'world wide web'. And what that synthesis produced in turn, of course, was the Western canon – a body of work which still remains the bedrock of the humanities taught in Western schools and universities.
In the end, does the candidate succeed in coming up with a challenging new idea: a network-theory of civilisation? There's a danger here of confusing civilisation with 'liberal civilisation', or even globalisation. And it was Raymond Aron who, back in the 1960s, using the work of Braudel (who Braudel himself cited in his History of Civilisations (1994)) claimed that the concept of civilisation as it had been defined in the West since the eighteenth century had lost much of its meaning. It had become devalued. There was an urgent need to transcend it. There was a need to forge a concept truly universal in its appeal.

But I think our candidate takes the idea further in a new direction, with the idea of a more 'liquid' concept – one that of course was developed at great length in several books by the late Zygmunt Bauman and his work on liquid modernity which doesn't appear in the text.

These caveats aside, I think this is a persuasive and compelling thesis that more than merits the award of the degree.

Christopher Coker

August 2017