

UC Merced

UC Merced Previously Published Works

Title

Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-Industrial Settlements.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6z31051v>

Journal

SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL, 46(3)

ISSN

0361-0160

Author

Amussen, Susan D

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed

THE

Volume XLVI, No. 3

Fall 2015

SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL

The Journal of Early Modern Studies



0361-0160(201523)46:3;1-0



Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-Industrial Settlements.

Daniel R. Curtis.

Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. xxii + 381 pp. \$144.95. ISBN 978-1-4724-2004-6.

REVIEWED BY: Susan D. Amussen

University of California, Merced

Coping with Crisis is a wide-ranging and ambitious book that seeks to test a model that might predict the behavior of settlements in times of crisis. Curtis is interested in why certain communities rebound rapidly after crisis—disease, famine, flood—and others do

not. Taking his cue from disaster studies, he hypothesizes that the structures of communities have a significant impact on what happens after a crisis. The range of the book may be best indicated by the bibliography, which extends over 100 pages.

At the center of the book, and structuring its argument, is a typology of settlements Curtis developed based on the distribution of power and property (both ownership and the social distribution of property) in a community. These are measured according to their levels of equality and stability. The egalitarian-polarized axis on the model is more familiar; Curtis assigns scores (1 for egalitarian, 0 for polarized, based on a Gini index for property and an assessment of legal rights for power), and averages them. A similar system is used to measure the dynamism of a social structure: how much does it change? Based on this, there are four major types of society, and he argues that each of them responds to crisis in particular ways that shape its level of resilience. Egalitarian-persistent societies tend to adopt protectionist strategies that made them resilient; egalitarian-dynamic societies managed resources in flexible ways that made them highly resilient; polarized-persistent societies adopted restrictive and coercive strategies which made them vulnerable to crisis; finally, the polarized-dynamic societies adopted short-term strategies (because those in power did not necessarily expect to remain there), which made them highly vulnerable.

Curtis tests his model in a series of case studies in Italy, the Netherlands, and England, from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries. He shows, for instance, that the population of the Florentine *contado* shrank dramatically between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. In response, urban landlords eager for a guaranteed supply of food—seeing the purpose of the countryside as meeting their needs—turned to sharecropping to deal with the shortage of labor and often lowered rents to attract tenants; such agreements did indeed feed the city, but they did not support rural society. In contrast, farther away from the city in the Casentino valley, there was a wide range of land tenures, and rents increased from the mid-fourteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, demonstrating a vibrant society and land market. Even traditional feudal tenures in the area involved relatively low labor obligations, and some old tenures with fixed (and low) rents remained. Landlords switched between direct and indirect management of agricultural lands. Curtis suggests that while inhabitants of the *contado* increasingly had the choice between “sharecropping, migration or hunger” (82), those in the Casentino Valley could be tenant farmers or landowners and they might have access to common lands, but also had opportunities for wage labor. The Florentine *contado*, on Curtis’s model, was highly polarized, but property shifted regularly, making it somewhat dynamic; this pushed it toward short-term strategies of exploitation. The Casentino Valley was more egalitarian and evenly poised between dynamic and persistent; this shaped its resilience.

Curtis undertakes similar studies for two areas in Cambridgeshire, two different Dutch communities (one of which is discussed in two different periods), and two communities in the Kingdom of Naples. Each is based on deep work in archival sources to determine the nature of economic and power relations, as well as the distribution of power. All of these are linked to demographic sources. In general, as Curtis demonstrates, the model has fairly good predictive power. There are a few anomalies (meaning the analysis was honest), which suggests that this model deserves further exploration.

This is an impressive study that suggests important directions for future research. However, it suffers from the challenge of many social science projects, insofar as the model is developed and then tested, but it is impossible to know if in each of these cases the variables chosen for the model are in fact the most important ones. Are there things happening

in the background that underlie property distribution and its persistence? In one case where the model does not work, Curtis finds that there are in practice two parallel societies, one of which is polarized-dynamic, but the other of which is egalitarian-persistent. But that only becomes evident in explaining the failure of the model. In the conclusion, Curtis argues that “where property and power were distributed unequally, people...ultimately did not exert themselves or did not make efforts to put in place institutions and resource management strategies needed for long-term environmental and societal sustainability” (270). Yet nowhere in the study are people’s efforts described: what we see are structures; there are landlords and tenants, but not people. The movement from structures to people’s choices, from structure to agency, is assumed rather than demonstrated.

In many ways this is an old-fashioned book, reminiscent of the great local studies of the 1960s and 1970s. It reminds us of the power of a comparative focus and theoretical lens. But it also reminds us of the limits of this approach, which fueled the turn to cultural history. The limits of this structural approach do not mean that this book is flawed; rather they raise questions that demand further study not just of social structure, but of cultural and social practices that support the human response to crisis and thus help us understand the social and environmental resilience of societies.

Daniel Curtis has written an impressive and wide-ranging book that should stimulate further research on rural communities. Curtis’s model will provide an important framework as historians further examine communities in crisis and try to understand the sources of resilience.

