



Combined Review of
Dark Age America by John Michael Greer, and
Ages of Discord by Peter Turchin



Civilizational Collapse or Cyclical Turmoil?

We all sense that something fundamental has gone badly wrong. But is it modern civilization itself that is going off the rails? Or do escalating inequality and political turmoil warn us of a bad accident ahead, but nothing that a well-staffed emergency room can't handle? Popular writer and student of history John Michael Greer makes a pithy case for the former in "[Dark Age America: Climate Change, Cultural Collapse, and the Hard Future Ahead](#)" (2016). Renowned interdisciplinary scholar and historian Peter Turchin combines US historical data with good models to suggest the latter in "[Ages of Discord: A Structural-Demographic Analysis of American History](#)" (2016).

Greer cites Arnold Toynbee's "Study of History", which chronicled the rise and fall of 26 civilizations. Key deal breakers today are climate change and peak oil. Following Joseph Tainter's work on "The Collapse of Complex Societies", Greer anticipates a series of partial collapses. Each partial collapse will simplify a superstructure of societal complexity (institutions, infrastructure, technology) that civilization no longer has the resources to fully support. His controversial contention is that we won't reach a level of sustainable resources, ecosystems, technology, and population until we're back to a fairly primitive agricultural society. He hopes that good books will be preserved for the benefit of our descendants, struggling to start over 500 years hence.

Turchin doesn't speculate beyond the present, but his cyclical theory suggests that we're due for a crisis, to be sure, yet we'll find some way to recover. The problem is that his theory focuses on social issues, not fundamental drivers such as resources, ecosystems, technology, trade, and institutions. These drivers manifest themselves only as they customarily affect things like population growth or contraction, economic and social competition, elite consumption, worker wages, inequality, violence, health, debt, etc. His basic construct is the "Political Stress Index" which is a product of an "Elite Mobilization Potential", a "Mass Mobilization Potential", and a measure of "State Financial Distress".

Using solid historical data, Turchin's indices of popular well-being and of political stress accurately identify both eras of "good feelings", such as 1810 – 1840 and 1940 – 1970, and "ages of discord", such as the decades leading up to and through the Civil War, the Gilded Age through WWI, and the current era following the "Reagan Revolution". He hopes that today's elites, being better informed, will find a "non-violent escape from the [current] crisis". The Fates say, "only time will tell". Or maybe our collective actions will make all the difference.

[Dr. Dick Burkhardt, UJEC GA Committee Chair]