

**DARK AGE AMERICA: CLIMATE  
CHANGE, CULTURAL COLLAPSE, AND  
THE HARD FUTURE AHEAD**

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I am both pessimist and optimist about our future. I expect our civilization, that of the West, to end entirely, and soon. Yet at the same time, I believe we can have an intensely bright future thereafter—not a return, certainly, but something wholly new, informed by the wisdom and knowledge of the past. Moreover, I think that technology, rightly ordered and used, will be a pillar of that future, if we reach it. John Michael Greer, a man hard to categorize politically, agrees with my pessimism, but not with my optimism, especially as regards the future use of technology. Today we will explore whether I should amend my beliefs, through the prism of Greer's *Dark Age America*.

This book outlines what Greer expects to happen in the next five hundred years, in the lands that are now America. Most of his focus is the next one hundred years, and relates to collapse—after that, he sketches the expected future only in broad outline. Greer, whose fiction future history *Retrotopia* I discussed last year, has for years written prolifically on civilizational failure and related topics. Apparently this 2016 book is mostly stitched-together posts from Greer's former blog, *The Archdruid Report*, where he blogged until 2017 (he now blogs at *Ecosophia*, which you will note combines the prefix for ecology with the Greek word for wisdom), but the book hangs together well, and seems to give a good overview of Greer's thought. If you check out his sites, you will get a flavor of Greer's areas of interest, which are heavily environmentally tinged, somewhat occult (he presents himself as a druid), and always interesting.

The author's reason for writing this book is to shake people out of their complacency, such that they take necessary actions now to alleviate their personal difficulties that are likely to arise in the immediate future. It is not to encourage broader political action to change our civilizational future; that future is set, and it's downhill for us, on rocket skis. Greer is perfectly well aware that most people, even people reading his book, will ignore him, because it is human nature to not make hard choices

and not to do hard work if either can be delayed. This tendency has been greatly exacerbated by the ideology of endless upward progress, a core part of modernity, which Greer traces to the Industrial Revolution, what he calls our “age of extravagance.” And our collapse will have a single ultimate cause—“the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet.” (In some ways, this book echoes Theodore Kaczynski, who castigated “industrial society” and is sometimes ironically called “Uncle Ted” by catastrophists, though he is not mentioned here.)

But all civilizations collapse. The bigger they come, the harder they fall, and we have been so very, very big. If there is a muse to Greer’s book, it is Arnold Toynbee, mid-century historian of civilizational cycles, someone not fashionable today, but who only a few decades ago was regarded as one of the great thinkers of the world. Just as Justin Timberlake brought sexy back, Greer is bringing Toynbee back. Joseph Tainter, who more recently wrote how complexity collapsed societies, also gets considerable play, as do the less recent Romans. In general, Greer bases much of his analysis on history, without viewing the past as deterministic. His knowledge of history is one reason why Greer’s analyses are far superior to those of lesser men such as Scott Alexander and Curtis Yarvin, who occasionally find a nut, like a blind squirrel, but whose ideas about our future are hobbled by their appalling ignorance of history. True, I think some of Greer’s history is not entirely accurate (the French and Russian revolutions were not caused by the middle classes disposing of a ruling class they regarded as inessential, for example). And “The industrial plant was abandoned in an orgy of offshoring motivated by short-term profit-seeking” not in the “Reagan era,” but in the Clinton era. (The real Decade of Greed was the 1990s; we are just told it was the 1980s because the people who dictate our cultural tropes are all Left, and hated Reagan. What the 1980s were was the last decade of uncynical American hope.) But you cannot predict the future without knowing a great deal about the past, and overall Greer passes this test.

Greer’s core point is that our apparent prosperity, of our industrial society, is a mirage, built on a small portion of mankind burning through half a billion years of stored sunlight. When a society relies on nonrenewable resources, as those disappear, the society must retrench by dropping maintenance costs. It is inevitable, but doesn’t fix the

problem; it's a spiral all the way down until equilibrium can be reached, as both Toynbee and Tainter discussed, analyzing many past civilizations. Greer calls this process "catabolic collapse." Energy failure will be both the immediate trigger for our downward spiral and the reason the equilibrium reached will be a very much lower energy state. Along the way, and contributing, we will face environmental unravelling, political unravelling, and economic unravelling. There is no possible fallback position short of total reset; any safety net that used to be provided by science, technology, or culture, has long since rotted away. Nuclear power is not the answer; "it never pays for itself," and is extremely dangerous, both in normal conditions and even more so as things fall apart. Renewable energy is "long on enthusiasm and cooked numbers and short on meaningful assessment." No magic is coming to save us.

It may seem that we have reserves of fossil fuels for quite a few more decades, but Greer says we will have to stop burning fossil fuels soon, when extracting them takes more energy than the energy gained by extracting them, which is no doubt true (though he never mentions that we still have a huge amount of relatively easy-to-extract coal, which seems to cut against his analysis). He also makes the subtler point that as energy becomes more expensive to extract, even if it can be done at a net gain, more and more of society's resources become devoted to extraction, "leaving less and less for all other uses." This alone means apogee is past and we are heading downward. Energy failure will fully expose the fakeness of our economy. Most of so-called GDP really consists of worthless financialization and other forms of intermediations, all made possible by cheap energy. Real GDP is declining, as energy costs rise and ignored externalities come home to roost. More and more, we have to use more energy to obtain resources from lower quality raw materials, tightening the screw.

What will the lower-energy future look like? It'll have to deal with the aftereffects of our blowing through the Earth's fossil fuels, notably global warming. Now, as I've said before, I'm sympathetic to the idea it's a bad choice to pump billions of tons of industrial byproducts into the atmosphere. It seems it's likely to have deleterious effects. On the other hand, I am now living in my third decade of falsified predictions with respect to global warming, and even a moron can see that a huge percentage of the focus on global warming is a grift, a way for worthless

people to obtain money and power, and to achieve their ideological ends. But Greer, no moron, can see some of this, and not other parts of it. He complains about money corrupting those opposed to global warming alarmism, without seeing that thousands of times more money flows to those who push global warming alarmism. He acknowledges that science is entirely corrupt, but he seems to think science is wholly reliable in the case of global warming, despite all the reasons he adduces for corruption in science being found there to a greater degree than anywhere else.

In any case, it doesn't really matter. Greer is nothing but a realist, and he doesn't think we're going to stop burning fossil fuels and adding to global warming. He's not adding his voice to those calling for action. He no doubt hates Greta Thunberg, who we can all agree is an annoying little toad. Global warming will fix itself, because we are running out of energy, so we will stop causing global warming, whether we want to or not. Greer's point is rather that eventually global warming will radically reshape the physical landscape of what was the United States (this book is about America, not Europe or some other place), and our descendants will have to deal with the resulting problems, because we won't be able to use cheap energy to stave off the inevitable damage. We will therefore revert to large areas of North America being desert or grassland, unable to support any large populations. Most of the coasts will be flooded. Moreover, other areas will be poisoned by chemical and nuclear wastes, made unproductive by topsoil loss, and otherwise damaged, until hundreds or thousands of years later, they recover.

Sooner or later, the result of this decline will be a sparsely populated North America. Greer is fine with this, not because he's anti-human (quite the contrary), but because, he says, the globe simply lacks the resources to support billions of people in the style they desire. He doesn't press to limit population artificially; he merely points out it will be limited, like it or not, when the energy subsidy of fossil fuels disappears, and food production craters. (He explicitly endorses 1972's *The Limits to Growth* as an accurate analysis.) We'll get, and already are getting, a population bust. But, interestingly, he points out that massive population decline does not necessarily mean mountains of famine-caused corpses. If the annual death rate increases a mere one percent, and the birth rate doesn't change, a population drops by ninety-five percent in

three centuries—and if it's a three percent increase, it's one century. (I do note these numbers don't seem entirely right. If the birth rate is high enough, relative to the death rate, it would seem population would keep growing.) This is depressing, but Greer manages to add some levity (this book is often funny), while pointing out that population drops will probably be more sudden than this smooth decline. "[P]opulation declines are rarely anything like so even as [this] thought experiment suggests. [The] other three horsemen, in particular, tend to get bored of their poker game at intervals and go riding out to give the guy with the scythe some help with the harvest."

But the people who are alive won't care that much. Greer appears to agree with James C. Scott that most people are often better off in a society that drops from a more complex to a less complex level. After all, "In terms of the distribution of labor, capital, and production, the latest offerings of today's job market are indistinguishable from the arrangements of an ancient Egyptian landowner and the peasants who planted and harvested his fields." Our elites (not just the government, but the entire complex of the professional-managerial elite) have created a self-perpetuating system that selects for stability and not rocking the boat; that type of system fares very poorly in crises. Our rotten ruling classes will, if history is any guide, not take any necessary action, and mostly die.

The downward slide will be further greased with political collapse, as it always is with failing civilizations. Greer, like me, sees that what is claimed to be a rock-solid system, with an "illusion of invincibility," is in fact extremely fragile, which means not that it will collapse of its own weight, but will collapse when it faces the least real crisis. The elites are completely disconnected from the internal proletariat, in Toynbee's term. "Once the crisis hits, the unraveling of the institutional structures of authority can happen with blinding speed, and the former ruling elite is rarely in a position to do anything about it." As with all late-stage societies, sclerosis is the order of the day, and vast portions of our resources are "consumed by institutions that no longer have any real function beyond perpetuating their own existence and the salaries and prestige of their upper-level functionaries." (While Greer doesn't mention it, this is a manifestation of Peter Turchin's analysis of elite over-production.) We will get disintermediation—which will destroy

the ruling class, after it destroys the upper-middle layer of parasites. We may get it slow; we may get it fast. The skills now in demand in the elite will be shown to be worthless in the new world order. We will see new, more decentralized, political systems, all the way down to warlordism.

Which makes me think. I sometimes believe that I am fated to become a warlord myself, by which I do not mean some kind of predator, but rather the head of an armed patronage network. The key function of a warlord is the short- and long-term protection, military and otherwise, of those who recognize his authority and act, in part, at his behest. The classic example is early medieval feudalism, although naturally there are many variations throughout history and different cultures. A warlord doesn't need to be raiding his neighbors all the time (though that's possible, for example, the Vikings); he just has to prevent his neighbors from successfully raiding him and his people, because that's the number one rule of patronage—make sure those who recognize you as patron feel secure.

We should also remember that *Road Warrior*-type societies don't exist, and never have, in the West at least. People will do almost anything to avoid anarchy. Thus, if society falls completely apart, it will rebuild itself immediately, though starting at the lowest level. This is where I come in. At this moment I preside over what amounts to an extended, quite sizeable, compound, which when complete I like to say, accurately, will be impervious to anything but direct organized military attack. Yet it requires a group of men to make it work; the fantasy that one family can garrison a large area, or any area, and be left alone, is just that. You have to sleep sometime, and as a friend of mine once, many years ago, stated my view on the world, "Bad people are everywhere, and they must be put down." Thus, I need what I call "shooters"—say fifteen able-bodied, and adequately trained, men. Together, such a group can operate my compound, both defensively and administratively. And I have the personality, and skills, to lead such a group. I am nothing if not decisive, the core competency of a leader in any field, and I am adequately charismatic.

Once you take on such men, however, whether extended family or friends, you are responsible for them and their families. You are their patron. You are the source of authority, and you must deliver the goods. From there, in any societal collapse or fracture, there is only one way

forward—taking responsibility for more people, because of the gravitational force exerted by any successful mini-society. Shrinking your patronage is probably fatal; it's certainly dangerous. All the incentives are to build your patronage network. Moreover, trade of many types develops naturally, and a patron is incentivized to work with other patrons to benefit everyone involved, by encouraging and protecting beneficial trade, further expanding patronage. Of such ferment are warlords born—not just to protect their people, but to ensure they are fed, to administer justice, and to provide relaxation, entertainment, social intercourse, and all the benefits people crave, especially in uncertain times. A good warlord makes it so his people can sleep soundly at night. Someone has to do it, and I'm logically positioned, both materially and psychologically, to do it in my little area of the world.

This isn't like the movies. I don't think a warlord, in most cases, will have to spend a lot of time fighting. In most of America, in a total governmental collapse, organized predation isn't nearly as likely as some think. As I like to point out, if you are a bad man who decides to live by predation, you may collect a hundred hard men and go around rolling up suburban homes, for the food and women. But in a place such as where I live, suburban Indiana, and in most of America, for every Pulte home you take down, you will probably lose five or ten men, because the amount of weapons held by the average citizen is considerable, and attacking fixed defenses is always a crapshoot. Even in a best case scenario for him, the leader of a predatory warband is going to have a short shelf life. And that's ignoring that for some targets, such as my compound, and others you might not expect, you'll lose a lot more men than ten percent—closer to a hundred percent, and then I will impale survivors out front as a warning to others.

Do I like this future for myself? Not really. I like relaxing, keeping my bees, and watching the sun rise and set in peace. I do not really want Christ, at my judgment, to opine on whether it was acceptable that I impaled bad men. But if social collapse happens, nobody is going to ask me if I like it; it will happen organically, because all other choices are worse. And if Greer is right, some variation on this is likely to be how I spend the later decades of my life. You can take to calling me Baron Haywood now, if you'd like.

Anyway, in the here and now, Greer says that science, and more broadly technology, isn't going to save us. Even if there were scientific solutions, we are in the civilizational phase where rising costs and enormous parasitism mean declining returns to scientific inputs. I think we actually have negative returns, for the most part. I call this the Yas Kween Shaniqua problem—for example, it took us twenty years to make the James Webb space telescope, with far more expenditure of time and money that it should have taken, but we could never create such an instrument again, or anything like it, because the ideological demands to give both money and honors to those who contribute nothing, or rather who are enormously destructive of accomplishment, would mean it would never advance beyond the vague planning stages, but still absorb enormous resources.

“Science” continuously engages in overt falsifications of past truth and current reality. Science isn't trusted for good reason—because, in most areas, it no longer has net value for society. Examples of fake and destructive science are many—nearly 100% of the “scientific” response to the Wuhan Plague; the replication crisis; or that it now appears that that the entire supposed scientific basis of anti-depression drugs is likely false. And if you want another example, consider the ongoing attempt to make monkeypox, a disease spread purely by homosexual orgies and homosexual pedophiles abusing children, into a supposed health crisis for all of us (but without any restrictions on orgies being suggested). Greer predicts our future society will look with a jaundiced eye at science and complex technology, especially given that most real benefits today accrue to the ruling classes, while the other classes get screwed. Scientists are losing, and soon will lose entirely, the prestige they, in a departure from the historical norm, have had for the past several decades.

And to round it out, our culture is crapping out too. The modern world, through technology, has stripped us of meaning, most of all by inserting technology between people and activities. Machines, or the Machine (shades of Paul Kingsnorth) absorb us, and worse, guide and direct us, mostly to use other machines, in an endless regress. “[M]ost people in the industrial world flood their nervous systems with torrents of electronic noise. . . . [M]uch of this is quite openly intended to manipulate their thoughts and feelings by economic and political



interests." Happiness is in very short supply, and we are kept in a fugue state by advertising and the internet, which give us "distorted imitations of immediate experience, intended to get you to think about the world in ways that immediate experience won't justify" (something that Matthew B. Crawford also has much to say about). The internal proletariat can no longer look to the dominant minority, a competent ruling class, for guidance; it must make its own path forward, and that path is going to be rocky.

There is nothing to be done to reverse that "industrial civilization [is heading] out through history's exit turnstile." We just need to do what we can, given that fact. We should get used to using less energy, having less stuff, and receiving less stimulation (the last an unalloyed good). Anyone who proposes anything else is not serious—yet most people flail around seeking for "answers that will allow them to keep enjoying the absurd extravagance that passed, not too long ago, for an ordinary lifestyle among the industrial world's privileged classes." The chaos is coming; make ready. Each of us is best served by getting ahead of this process, decomplexifying our lives, and making ourselves productive, if perhaps less wealthy by today's ephemeral standards. We will get something like the feudal system—Greer offers a fascinating, and historically accurate, narration of the life of a typical medieval peasant, which wasn't bad at all, and explicitly claims that although medieval society was caste-bound and often unjust, in neither case was it more so than our society today, "and it's worth noting that the average medieval peasant worked fewer hours and had more days off than you do."

Greer thinks we probably won't live in the actual Dark Age in our lifetimes; collapse is often a slow process. I'm not so sure; collapse is often a step function. Regardless, for an individual, Greer correctly says that the most important thing is to be able to create actual value. (And we should get as many physical books as possible, and perhaps maintain the ability to print more. I'm at 9,000 volumes, heading toward 20,000 volumes, so I am on the right track.) But we can console ourselves we are just the latest civilization to go through this process, and we can leave valuable lessons for our successors. No need to weep.

Do I agree with all this? Yes, up to a point. I have noted before that our social problems are caused not by modern technology, nor by the Industrial Revolution, but by the completely-unrelated so-called

Enlightenment. But that is beside the point; for Greer, social problems are ancillary to physical constraints. It is true I am a techno-optimist, yet it is also true that every one of the problems Greer identifies is very real, and that not a single one can be solved without finding a new cheap source of energy—and that would only be the start of a necessary remaking of our society.

I have criticized the Prophet mindset, of doom and gloom, in the words used by Charles Mann in *The Wizard and the Prophet*. I favor the Wizard mindset, of technological solutions to looming problems, which has always proved right, just as Prophets have always been proved wrong. After all, *The Limits to Growth* made specific predictions about the imminent catastrophe of global starvation in the 1970s that were completely falsified, something Greer skips over to claim that it was still predictive. But, as with global warming, it erodes credibility when a specific predicted catastrophe does not arrive on schedule.

Nonetheless, it is certainly accurate that all my techno-optimism is dependent on cheap energy, and Greer is correct that fossil fuels will run out, and that renewables will in no way substitute. There are those who say that nuclear fission is the way out, and that Greer is simply wrong that it is a dead end. Maybe it is, but after seventy years, you'd think some country would have run with that ball if it really was as enticing as its proponents claim. That leaves new sources of energy, of which only one has any possibility of coming to fruition—fusion. And I have been told for forty years that fusion is right around the corner, and it is always lies. Moreover, because Yas Kween Shaniqua, and a variety of other reasons for technological plateauing, it's not coming anytime soon. Which suggests that my optimism is misplaced.

I'm not sure what to do with that. One step in front of the other is all we can do. For now, increasing individual resilience is most definitely what we should do. Forming networks of like-minded others, on whom we can rely for mutual assistance, and with whom we can create new local societies, is likewise crucial. Maybe once the stupidity is squeezed out, there will still be enough resources and focus to make necessary breakthroughs. What matters is culture and capabilities. China has more than a billion people and still has accomplished little of note or worth. Israel has nine million people, and is in many ways incredibly sclerotic, bureaucratic, and socialistic. Yet it punches far, far above its

weight, not only in technology, but also in bearing children and other evidence of a healthy society. If one had to pick the more important country for the future, it would be Israel, hands down. Perhaps this is evidence that a small, unified group, probably mostly made up of our grandchildren or even further descendants, can bring back our future. I hope so. Greer would maintain that a static society is adequate for human flourishing, but I don't think that's true. I think a society that is not advancing is falling back. We just need to do what we can to make future advancement possible.