



Secular Cycles by Peter Turchin and Sergey A. Nefedov

Author(s): Brian J. L. Berry

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to name a few. Yet Barkey chooses to focus mainly on the works of senior scholars in Turkey and abroad who write in English.

Barkey's selection of sources is probably determined by the structural institutional framework she employs, a framework that does not fully take into consideration the critical interpretation of cultural elements, the spectrum of negotiated meanings in society. The focus on networks privileges the analysis of formal political and economic relations over the critical reading of cultural ones. How various social actors negotiate meaning in their everyday lives, how they thus influence Ottoman culture, and, furthermore, how these actors are currently interpreted by scholars of the Ottoman Empire in Turkey today remains largely unaddressed. Hence, even though Barkey argues that her analysis focuses on "the interaction between the macro-structural institutional level, the meso level of networks and individual agency" (p. 278), the last one seems to dissipate as structures and institutions dominate.

This lack of consideration of social agency is perhaps best documented in the imagery Barkey employs at the conclusion of her book. She likens the Ottoman Empire to a cosmic system kept together by "the gravitation of networks that both built and changed the empire" (p. 294). In this system, the financial pull of the center is countered by the push from the provinces, mainly due to changes in tax farming. The system then unravels into "a galaxy of nationalisms increasingly floating free from one another" as the practice that holds the empire together, namely "the policy of flexibly managing diversity" is eventually abandoned by the center (p. 295). Such a depiction takes into account how the formal, solid structures shape social reality. It does so at the expense of noticing and incorporating into the explanatory narrative the system's spectrum of colors and meaning as well as the manner in which social actors actually actively shape this cosmic system. In spite of this small criticism, however, Barkey's impressive work is a most welcome addition to the analysis of the Ottoman Empire within the structural institutional framework.

Secular Cycles. By Peter Turchin and Sergey A. Nefedov. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. ix+349.

Brian J. L. Berry
University of Texas at Dallas

In the book *Secular Cycles*, Peter Turchin, an ecologist and evolutionary biologist, and Sergey Nefedov, of the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, are bold in their claim that there may be general laws of historical dynamics—that historical societies can be studied with the same methods physicists and biologists use to study natural systems. Start with a general theory, they say, translate it into mathematical models, use the models to make specific quantitative pre-

dictions about key variables, assess the accuracy of the predictions using real data, and, in light of deviations, iterate to revise the theory, repeating the process as necessary.

To substantiate the claim they focus on long-term oscillations in economic and political dynamics, so-called secular cycles, that they argue recurred in agrarian societies in the last two millennia. Their point of departure is Jack Goldstone's demographic-structural model of population growth and the breakdown of states (*Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* [University of California Press, 1991]). The primary cases they studied are (1) mid-12th–mid-15th-century Plantagenet England and Capetian France, (2) mid-15th–late-17th-century Tudor-Stuart England, (3) Valois France and Muscovy, (4) Republican (350–30 BCE) and Principate Rome (30 BCE–285 CE), and (5) 17th–20th century Romanov Russia.

The demographic-structural model involves several interlinked variables: demographic-economic (essentially Malthusian), social (the role of elites in surplus extraction), and political (with a focus on instability and the breakdown of the state). Briefly, they argue that secular cycles begin with population growth. There are early increases in the standard of living as more resources are brought into production. Over time population growth in excess of productivity gains has a series of effects, however, as the carrying capacity of the land is reached: rents rise, landholdings are fragmented, landless peasants migrate to cities. While the price of foodstuffs increases, the cost of trade and craft products falls due to increasing supplies of cheap labor in the cities. Elites benefit from high rents on land and low labor costs for manufactured goods, but inequality increases as peasants face undernourishment and increased susceptibility to disease. As carrying capacity is exceeded stagflation sets in. During this phase, overpopulated elite lineages fall on hard times: inequality increases in every stratum, and there is destabilizing intralite competition. The state's ability to maintain order is threatened, and the response is the expansion of armies and bureaucracies, rising state expenditures, taxes, debt, and collapse marked by both elite-mobilized and popular uprisings. This socio-political instability feeds back to affect population numbers: lowered productive capacity reduces consumption, malnourishment provides fertile ground for epidemic disease, mortality increases. Conflict among elites radically reduces their numbers. The state disintegrates, setting the stage for the next cycle when a new integrative phase emerges, marked by centralizing tendencies under a new elite. The entire process is conceived to be endogenous, driven by its internal dynamics: expansion and growth lead to stagflation, stagflation to crisis and the breakdown of the state, and breakdown to depression in which excess elites are eliminated, setting the stage for the next phase of expansion and growth.

A highlight of the book is the creative assembly of evidence in support of the authors' description of historical dynamics. For example, England's population increased from a post-Conquest 3 million to a 6 million peak

in the late 13th century and declined to under 3 million in the mid-15th century, with lockstep movements of grain prices and numbers of elites and inverse movements of tax revenues and sociopolitical instability, culminating in rising crown debts and breakdown during the Wars of the Roses. Similar stories are told for each of the other cases, leading to the claim that the “match between theoretical predictions about population dynamics and empirical patterns was quite good” (p. 303) and that “some sort of general regularities of the historical process appear to exist” (p. 312): a neo-Malthusian principle relating population pressure on resources to price effects for food, land, and labor; a related principle of elite overproduction, conflict, and collapse; and a third that links overpopulation and elite overproduction to sociopolitical instability, fiscal crisis, and the collapse of the state.

While this is a well-constructed story, an equally plausible case can be made that the authors’ cycles dance to an exogenous pacemaker (Jared M. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* [Penguin Books, 2006]). Low solar activity results in lower average temperatures, which adversely affects agricultural productivity. Global warmists notwithstanding there have been long cycles of solar activity and global temperatures that correlate with the alleged secular cycles. Rome’s ascendancy was in a warm period that preceded the Dark Ages’ cold period, followed by the medieval warm period that reached its maximum between 1100 and 1250 and then descended to a low, the Wolf minimum (1280–1350), at the end of which the Black Death ravaged Europe (1347–50). Temperatures abated for a century as Europe was reshaped in response to the massive depopulation before declining to the Spörer minimum between 1460 and 1550, rose for another century and then descended to the depths of the Little Ice Age in the Maunder minimum (1645–1715), during which time period the bubonic plague returned. Each epoch of declining temperatures would have been sufficient to cut yields, reducing fertility as marriages were delayed and the proportions never married increased while disease-inexperienced populations were ravaged by plague. Each epoch of increasing temperatures brought increased agricultural productivity and population increase. The crisis phase of the Plantagenet and Capetian cycles occurred in the Wolf minimum and their terminal depressions during the Spörer minimum. The Tudor-Stuart and the Valois and Muscovy cycles foundered during the Maunder minimum. If there is indeed an exogenous pacemaker, it would call the central part of the Turchov-Nefedov theory, that of a self-propelled social process, into question. Those who are interested in grand social theories will want to read and reflect. I suspect that there will be many who then will rebut.