

# The Histories and Theories Generational Cycles

Michael Kiyoshi Salvatore

Does history repeat?

Ask a historian and they may humor the suggestion of a literal recurrence, perhaps conceding that some events may metaphorically rhyme. Humanity's ability to shape its fate is limited, after all; despite our many advances in embodied and material technologies, the incomprehensible scale of our endeavors and their potential for catastrophe, we possess the same fundamental needs and behavioral inclinations as we had millennia ago, constraining our responses to present, novel events. Inherited, rational knowledge of the past is rarely a substitute for the intuitive wisdom of first-hand experience, often dooming us to chronically relearn hard lessons.<sup>1</sup> To suggest these patterns have sustained, predictable regularity is a far more exceptional claim, however, demanding exceptional evidence.

Among laypeople, some cyclical models like Spengler's theory of civilizational decline or the Schlesingers' political oscillations between conservatism and liberalism may intrigue, but history is most commonly understood in terms of two visions that Richard Tarnas articulates in *Cosmos and Psyche*: history tracks "a predominantly problematic, even tragic narrative of humanity's gradual but radical fall and separation from an original state of oneness with nature and an encompassing spiritual dimension of being"<sup>2</sup> or else history describes "the evolution of human consciousness as an epic narrative of human progress, a long heroic journey from a primitive world of dark ignorance, suffering, and limitation to a brighter modern world of ever-increasing knowledge, freedom, and well-being."<sup>3</sup> The former has affinity with everyday impulses toward conserving tradition against further descent, the latter with reforming and revolutionizing impulses for further transcendence, best embodied by the ideals of the Enlightenment. The former intimates a downward line of time, the latter upward.

1 Two supplemental truisms: "History doesn't repeat, but it rhymes." - Mark Twain (apocryphal) "Those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it." - George Santayana

2 Richard Tarnas. *Cosmos and Psyche* (New York: Plume, 2007), 13.

3 Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 12.

The contemporary period has thrown these complementary visions into a state of profound uncertainty, as the double-edged power of instrumental reason and industry have produced unprecedented mass cruelty and devastation through the twentieth century. Secular grand narratives of history were sacralized, justifying horrors that modernity was believed to have overcome, “the Enlightenment vision beginning to encounter its own shadow.”<sup>4</sup> In response, some, like the typical historian above, contend that “no coherent pattern actually exists in human history or evolution . . . which itself is shaped and constructed by forces beyond itself and beyond the awareness of the interpreting subject.”<sup>5</sup> In this light, history is best understood, in Arnold Toynbee’s words, as “one dang thing after another,” a succession of events at best too complex to be understood, or at worst ultimately arbitrary.

While containing some truth, this reaction to the one-sidedness of modernity is itself one-sided partisan framework ultimately in its exacerbation of the meaning crisis that hangs like a pall over much of humankind. History should not be an instrumental tool for ideology, but it does not suffice as mere objective description of the past or collection of brute facts; it serves a fundamental function, like mythologies of old, to provide an essential sense of time and place in the world.

This pragmatic approach to history may have no purchase in academia, but the gulf between worldviews need not be incommensurate for the many who may be amenable to dispassionate and robust models of cyclical time. This appeal to the skeptical yet curious is best exemplified by a theory proposed by independent historians Neil Howe and the late Bill Strauss, who too call for a return to minding the cycles of the natural world, against the “scholarly rejection of time’s inner logic [and the] devaluation of history throughout [American] society,”<sup>6</sup> but do so on the basis of materially emergent patterns divorced from cosmic implications. As analysts and aides in Washington, their shared interests led to their collaboration on a history of the United States through its generations and their life cycles. As Howe explains, “along the way

4 Tamas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 15.

5 Tamas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 14-15.

6 William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 12.

[we] discover[ed] some outstanding patterns in history,”<sup>7</sup> a fourfold cycle of historical moods that shape and are shaped by generational cohorts, first presented in their 1991 book, *Generations*. In their 1998 follow-up, *The Fourth Turning*, they provide great amounts of evidence for precedent correlations to their theory, both mythic and academic, and elaborate predictions for this cycle’s nadir through the second and third decades of the twenty-first century. They in turn prophesy an event of symbolic equivalence to the American Revolution, Civil War, Great Depression, and World War II periods, “bone-jarring crises so monumental that, by their end, American society emerged in a wholly new form.”<sup>8</sup>

Few historians show support for Strauss and Howe’s theory<sup>9</sup>; reviews often compare their work to the gold standard of all-encompassing, overdetermined, and non-falsifiable pseudoscience, astrology. Its sociological framework, however, has had profound consequences: Strauss and Howe’s name for the generation rising at the time of their first book, Millennials, has become standard; *Generations* inspired Bill Clinton to select fellow Boomer Al Gore as his Vice President, seeking a like-minded partner in the Oval Office;<sup>10</sup> and Howe remains recognized as a preeminent researcher on generations.<sup>11</sup> The popular success of Strauss and Howe’s framework is undoubtedly due to their generational types fitting the common idioms of American cohorts: industrious GIs, conciliatory Silents, righteous Boomers, and cynical Generation X. This appeal to intuition in turn lends plausibility to its predictive implications, as the suggestion of a coming crisis mirroring the major wars of United States history inspires many crusaders for radical change across the political spectrum, including Steve Bannon, former adviser of president

7 Brain Lamb, William Strauss, and Neil Howe, “Generations: History of America’s Future,” C-Span, March 20, 1991, video interview, 60:00. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?17548-1/generations-history-americas-future>.

8 Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 6.

9 Lamb, “Generations,” 26:04-26:47: “The kinds of historians who are drawn to our book -- and I’m sure it will be very controversial among academics because we are presenting something that is so new -- but the kinds who are drawn to it are the ones who themselves have focused on the human life cycle rather than just the sequential series of events. Some good examples of that are Morton Keller up at Brandeis and David Hackett Fischer. These are people who have noticed the power in not just generations, but the shifts that have happened over time in the way Americans have treated children and older people and have tried to link that to the broader currents of history.”

10 As recounted by President Bill Clinton’s aide Dick Morris, in Jeremy W. Peters, “They Predicted ‘The Crisis of 2020’ ... in 1991. So How Does This End?” *The New York Times* (April 8, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/us/politics/coronavirus-republicans-trump.html>.

11 For example, he has presented at various Pew Research events, including a panel on Millennials available here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/03/11/portrait-of-the-millennials/>.

Donald Trump.<sup>12</sup> Strauss and Howe’s first book *Generations* explicitly named a “Crisis of 2020”<sup>13</sup> as a pivotal year,<sup>14</sup> leading to broader resurgence of interest in the theory in the wake of the year’s pandemic and escalating violence at protests.<sup>15</sup>

To unpack generational cycles, we will begin with the history of its development and the differentiation of family and social generations, followed by a review of Strauss and Howe’s theory of individual and social life cycles and how they operate as an engine for social progress.<sup>16</sup> This framework is then applied to the United States’ history, first looking at the “Great Events,” followed by a review of the intervening periods. The particular typologies and life cycles of the four generational types are addressed, but given they are well-articulated elsewhere, they are left largely unexplored. The essay closes with some tentative analysis on the interrelationship of generational and astrological type.

## **Histories of Generational Cycles**

Strauss and Howe emphasize the inevitability of cycles as the base unit of time. Paraphrasing the philosopher Mircae Eliade, they note how early humans were in tune with the cycles of the sky and seasons, agrarians and nomads that compared their “behavior with that of [their] ancestors . . . performing the right deed at the right moment in the perpetual circle, much as an original god or goddess performed a similar deed during time’s mythical first circle.”<sup>17</sup> For these peoples, generations meant “the set of all children ‘brought into being’ by a father or mother,”<sup>18</sup> a history of kin and genealogical lineage, living lives of minimal variation from venerated ancestors. This order of time and its *family generations* were inevitably, periodically disrupted by catastrophic events that would create an indelible imprint on all those who lived

12 Peters, “They Predicted . . .”

13 William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 15.

14 Strauss and Howe specify two potential timespans; either *Generations*, 381: “lasting from 2013 to 2024” or 382: “2020 to 2029”

15 Peters, “They Predicted . . .”

16 The essay liberally quotes the authors and their sources with few references to external supplemental research, aiming to spark recognition of relevant archetypal themes with minimal editorialization.

17 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 8.

18 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 434.

through it, leading to the emergence of a distinct cohort, or *social generation*,<sup>19</sup> those “sharing an age location in history and therefore a common peer personality.”<sup>20</sup> Once these generations passed on, however, the memory of these events would as well, and a traditional homeostasis of family generations would resume. Strauss and Howe use *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* to illustrate this point: the Trojan War represents a unique event that mobilizes a coalition of Greek states to a victorious conclusion, but after its resolution, its characters pass on and the unique moment “is worn down by the unchanging round of social tradition from which it had briefly emerged. The cycle vanishes, and the dark ages return – no longer giving rise to the stuff of epic poetry.”<sup>21</sup>

With the spread of writing, city-states, and empires across Eurasia through the Medieval period, “Great Event” triumphs and catastrophes grew more common, requiring novel conceptions of time and place. Religious eschatologies rose in response to the breakdown of placid cycles of time, messianic visions of descent from proverbial Golden Ages and Paradise toward apocalypse and renewal of the world. For early recorded Indo-European history “the standard measure of cosmic time . . . was not the year or the century, but the *generation*,”<sup>22</sup> for which a conflation of family and social generations was common. Family generations tracked the lineage of mythic figures and royalty, such as the Bible’s chain of begetting from Adam, or as when “Herodotus spoke of ‘345 generations’ of Egyptian priests,”<sup>23</sup> but ancient writers also noted cyclic stages of descending social generations following the founding of new regimes or religions, making “no implicit reference to parentage [but rather emphasizing] that each new *genos* . . . lives at about the same time and possess a distinct way of life and set of values.”<sup>24</sup> Polybius’s observations on Greco-Roman city-states led to his model of a “recurring progression of political regimes – from kingship to aristocracy to democracy to anarchy – from which a new kingship would emerge.”<sup>25</sup> Ibn Khaldun, paraphrased by Strauss and Howe, describes this pattern among medieval Islamic dynasties:

19 This term is used in *The Fourth Turning; Generations* uses the equivalent term ‘cohort generations.’

20 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 434.

21 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 86-87.

22 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 433.

23 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 62.

24 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 434.

25 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 87.

*The first generation establishes rule by conquest, after which it governs with unquestioned authority. The second generation witnesses and admires that achievement, which it weakly emulates. Lacking firsthand knowledge of how the dynasty was established, the third generation not only lacks the founder's qualities but ignores them, so the dynasty weakens further. Coming of age under ignorant tutelage, the fourth generation reaches adulthood despising the dynasty, which then crumbles. Out of the chaos a later generation produces a new king and a new dynasty, and the cycle repeats.*<sup>26</sup>

Strauss and Howe describe how “the Greeks sometimes hoped that Promethean reason might deliver man from perpetual destitution, while the Romans believed [in] a glorious destiny,”<sup>27</sup> but dynastic and empiric decline continued to predominate in human conceptions of history and generations. The Romans used the Etruscan term *saeculum*, both organic and embodied measurements of “‘a long human life’ and ‘a natural century,’”<sup>28</sup> to “periodize their chronicles, especially when describing great wars and new laws,”<sup>29</sup> finding great explanatory power in this length of time. In a strange coincidence, Rome fell just short of twelve regular centuries, just as Romulus was purported to prophesy “that Rome would last twelve units of time.”<sup>30</sup>

With the fall of Rome, Western monotheisms that “embrac[ed] the radically new concept of personal and historical time as a unidirectional drama”<sup>31</sup> began to “root out calendrical paganism, denounce classical cycles, and push underground entire branches of nonlinear learning, such as the hermetic fields of alchemy and astrology.”<sup>32</sup> This set the stage for the widespread emergence of linear time from “a relatively arcane idea, fully understood by only a small clerical elite”<sup>33</sup> to become the dominant worldview of the West, beginning with the Renaissance. During this time, “the elites of Western societies began to perceive themselves as

26 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 88.

27 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 9.

28 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 26.

29 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 27.

30 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 27.

31 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 9.

32 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 10.

33 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 9.

self-determining actors capable of altering the destiny of civilization.”<sup>34</sup> “The Reformation and the spread of the printed Gospel usher[ed] in a new urgency (and popular application) of linear history,”<sup>35</sup> its technological underpinning, the printing press, spurring a revolution in what it meant to identify as a people. As argued by historian Benedict Anderson, it paved the way for broadened and flattened conceptions of collective identity away from localities under shifting dynastic and sacred authority toward the “imagined community” of the modern nation-state, a novel entity bound by a shared vernacular language and secular stories distinct from rule and doctrine of more remote and less accountable elites.<sup>36</sup>

The decline of centralized religious dogma and control, in tandem with the successes of rational inquiry and experimentation, inverted the descent of humanity toward a second coming of Christ into an upward path of reason, the torch of the Enlightenment carried ever higher on the shoulders of those who came before. The concept of the saeculum was revived as the old Latin’s dual meanings of a century and long life, signifying a revival of this measurement of cyclical time in Western consciousness,<sup>37</sup> though without the implication of an endlessly repeating circle. This shift to a worldview that embraced innovation and progress was still nascent and heterogeneous in early modern Europe, however, where “meaningful membership in generations was limited to elites – that is, to those who were free to break from tradition and redefine the social roles of whatever phase of life they occupied.”<sup>38</sup> A paradigm shift towards widespread belief in linear progress and nationally-bound, peer-based generational cycles required a radical break from the past, an event that was unique to, and initiated by, the American colonies and their eighteenth century revolution, based in shared principles of liberty and progress over that of a common origin or authority.

With the emergence of modern democracy and nation-states, peer cohort consciousness began to spread; Strauss and Howe track its origins to the propagandists of the French

34 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 34.

35 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 9.

36 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), 44.

37 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 34. “In romance languages, the word became vulgarized into the derivatives still used today: the Italian *secolo*, the Spanish *siglo*, and the French *siècle*.”

38 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 95.

Revolution, “*philosophes* [who] liked to call themselves a unique generation”<sup>39</sup> at the end of the *ancien régime*.<sup>40</sup> In the following centuries, speculation about the nature of generations, the length of peer cohorts, and their power for social change became common among elite thinkers. Contemporary notions of social generations emerged in the nineteenth century: John Stuart Mill “formally defined a generation as ‘a new set of human beings’ who ‘have been educated, have grown up from childhood, and have taken possession of society;’”<sup>41</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey explicitly defined the distinction between family lineage and peer cohort generations,<sup>42</sup> describing the latter as “a relationship of contemporaneity . . . between those who had a common childhood, a common adolescence, and whose years of greatest vigor partially overlap;”<sup>43</sup> Auguste Comte noted that generations have a “unanimous adherence to certain fundamental notions”<sup>44</sup> and argued “generations had become, in the modern world, the master regulator of the pace of social change.”<sup>45</sup> Most theorists of the nineteenth century that Strauss and Howe cite said little about *how* generations were so central, but Comte, Émile Littré and Guisepepe Ferrari were notable exceptions. They independently developed fourfold models of perpetuating generational cycles, in contrast to ancient historians’ models which posited a collapse before a cycle’s reemergence. This distinction can be likened to “a spiral turn[ing] in a circle while at the same time moving upward – or downward,”<sup>46</sup> a synthesis of the two dominant frameworks of time and history, the circle and the line.

39 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 438.

40 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 63: “At about the same time that Europeans began to talk self-consciously about centuries, they also began to talk explicitly about peer groups.”

41 John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 892.

42 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 438.

43 Julián Mariás, *Generations: A Historical Method*, trans. Harold C. Raley (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama, 1970), 55, a translation of Wilhelm Dilthey, *Über das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen* (Berlin, Germany: Verlag von B.G. Teubner, 1924) 37: “Generation ist alsdann eine Bezeichnung für Verhältnis der Gleichzeitigkeit von Individuen; diejenigen, welche gewissermaßen nebeneinander emporwachsen d.h. ein gemeinsames Kindesalter hatten, ein gemeinsames Jünglingsalter, deren Zeitraum männlicher Kraft teilweise zusammenfiel, bezeichnen wir als dieselbe Generation.”

44 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 66, quoting Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive: Tome Quatrième et Dernier* (Paris, France: Bachelor, 1869), 679: “Quelque puissance sociale qu'on attribue au concours des intérêts, et même à la sympathie des sentimens [sic], ce concours et cette sympathie ne sauraient certainement suffire pour constituer la moindre société durable, si la communauté intellectuelle, déterminée par l'adhésion unanime à certaines notions fondamentales, ne vient point convenablement y prévenir ou y corriger d'inévitables discordances habituelles.”

45 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 63.

46 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 349.



Theories of generations entered their own decline in the twentieth century, however. Following the horror and devastation of the Great War, “the link between generations and progress seemed like a waste of time”<sup>47</sup> and a tired subject. Rising social thinkers preferred to describe “how each generation creates its own subjective reality, its own psychology, emotions, values, [and] art,”<sup>48</sup> such as José Ortega y Gasset, who viewed generations as a “dynamic compromise between the mass and the individual;”<sup>49</sup> his student Julián Mariás, who observed that “to ask ourselves to which generation we belong is, in large measure, to ask who we are;”<sup>50</sup> or philosopher Martin Heidegger who argued that “the fateful act of living in and with one’s generation completes the drama of human existence.”<sup>51</sup> Arnold Toynbee, Mariás, Samuel Huntington, and George Modelski all created their own fourfold models of generational rhythms around the mid-twentieth century, but this perennial reinvention of similar dynamical frameworks could not make up for their absence of clear definitions or quantifiability. Modern historiographic research asks questions of generational type that have no definite answers: “how do they arise? why should they change personality at any particular cohort boundary? and why should they have any particular length?”<sup>52</sup> As a consequence, generational theory has fallen out of intellectual favor just as it has risen in popular consciousness. No “cohort-group has come fully of age in America without encountering at least one determined attempt to name it”<sup>53</sup> since the 1920s, but generational type’s grand theoretical implications have gone the way of most other all-encompassing theories of the late modern period, “skeptics [now regarding] the cohort generation, like astrology, as a provocative idea searching blindly for a reason,”<sup>54</sup> useful for demographic analysis but without greater explanatory power.

## Theories of Generational Cycles

47 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 439.

48 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 439.

49 José Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*, trans. James Cleugh (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1961), 15.

50 Julián Mariás, *Generations*, 106.

51 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 69, a translation of Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Frankfurt, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann, 1927), 384-85: “*Das schicksalhafte Geschick des Daseins in und mit seiner »Generation« macht das volle, eigentliche Geschehen des Daseins aus.*”

52 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 440.

53 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 439.

54 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 440.

To unpack the proposed mechanism of generational cycles, the fourfold annual cycle of seasons will be analogized to the life cycle of the individual and generation in which they play a part, as “the rhythms of social change are reflected in the rhythms of biological and seasonal nature.”<sup>55</sup> Strauss and Howe likewise divide the life cycle into four parts, referring to various “ancients” producing similar divisions, including Pythagoras who saw “four phases, each roughly twenty years long and each associated with a season”<sup>56</sup> and the Romans who divided life into phases of “*pueritia* (childhood), *iuventus* (young adulthood), *virilitas* (maturity), and *senectus* (old age).”<sup>57</sup> Each phase of life comes with its own distinct opportunities and responsibilities:<sup>58</sup>

In the spring of life, from birth to one’s early twenties, children are dependent on others for protection, nurture, and avoiding harm. As they grow and learn, they are responsible for acquiring competence and absorbing the values of their community at the behest of elders.

In the summer of life, from one’s twenties to early forties, rising adults in the peak of their vitality end their apprenticeships and enter their socioeconomic roles. They are responsible for serving institutions as members of the majority, generating resources and starting families as the muscle and energy of society.

In the autumn of life, from one’s forties to mid-sixties, adults enter midlife and take on more leadership roles through parenting, teaching, and directing institutions. They are responsible for using their acquired values and experience to maintain the community and take on the mantle of power.

In the winter of life, from one’s sixties to mid-eighties, elders enter the role of stewardship for their communities, supervising, mentoring, channeling endowments, and passing on values with the wisdom of old age, taking advantage of the highest leadership posts. Past this age, late elderhood is most often a return to dependence in which values are remembered but rarely applied.

55 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 20.

56 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 53.

57 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 53.

58 The four phases of life are paraphrased from *Generations*, 60, which uses the age brackets 0-21, 22-43, 44-65, 66-87; and *The Fourth Turning*, 55-57, which uses the age brackets 0-20, 21-41, 42-62, 63-83. Due to this inconsistency, I chose less specific periods of time.

As described above, most of humanity has experienced little differentiation between the typical experience at each life stage for successive family generations, both parent and progeny occupying the same roles in roughly the same manner. So long as communities have maintained sustainable practices in stable environments, this equilibrium has provided little incentive for radical creativity or originality. As civilization rose and spread, however, so too did *kairotic* Great Events, such as the founding of new states and religions. Surplus resources and the emergence of an elite strata of society allowed for generations to emerge in contrast to those who came before them. In turn, the life cycles of successive generations began to exhibit distinct characteristics, leading to the emergence of peer cohorts and social generations. In these dynamic social arrangements, ties to familial bonds and traditions are weakened by the vital bonds of those who share a common experience and destiny.

Whether participating in a Great Event themselves or inheriting stories of their significance, peer cohorts are defined by these watershed moments: “the same cataclysm that a 10-year-old finds terrifying a 30-year-old may find empowering, a 50-year-old calming, a 70-year-old inspiring;”<sup>59</sup> “children mirror each other’s dread, youth each other’s valor, midlifers each other’s competence, and seniors each other’s wisdom,”<sup>60</sup> reinforcing collective attitudes, values, and identity. As life goes on, wave-like fluctuations in social attitudes and behaviors emerge between and through successive Great Events. These in turn further “shape the personalities of different age groups differently according to their phase of life, [who then retain] those personality differences as they grow older.”<sup>61</sup> In youth, circumstances may lead the parental generation toward over- or under-protection; in rising adulthood, criminality and drug abuse may be more rampant, and marriage and career opportunities may come easier or harder; power is at times taken sooner in adulthood, other times later; in elderhood, counsel may be readily heeded or haughtily rejected. By analogy, some summers of life may be cooler and wetter, some winters more mild or severe. The rhythmic variations of the social life cycle, if taken as a synchronic snapshot of history, show distinct “constellations” of shared generational experiences and

59 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 48.

60 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 58.

61 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 34.

attitudes up and down each stages of life, opposed to a universal, invariant life cycle. Instead, a recurrence of peer personalities emerges, interlocking, fourfold individual and social cycles in which “everyone who lives a normal lifespan experienc[es] every constellational era once.”<sup>62</sup>

Generations are not passive receivers of this shifting social mood, however, but its active creators. It is the “ongoing interplay of peer personalities [that gives] history a dynamic quality. How children are raised affects how they later parent. How youths come of age shapes their later exercise of leadership – which, in turn, substantially defines the coming-of-age experiences of others.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, peer cohorts cannot be truly understood by their qualities at any particular stage of life but through the retrospective and holistic lens of a generation’s life cycle and its impacts on the generations around it.<sup>64</sup> Broadly speaking, each generation’s trajectory aims to compensate for the shortcomings of its own coming-of-age experience for its own children. This desire for a generation “to leave behind a more secure and affluent world than [a generation] inherits”<sup>65</sup> in turn produces its “own unique brand of positive and negative endowments [with] its own special way of helping or hurting the future”<sup>66</sup> that other generations must, in turn, correct for – a dialectical interplay made most striking across child-parent generations.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, it is the generation in their youth who are best able to perceive the shadow and shortcomings of the generation that raises them, who are themselves reacting to the shadow of their parents in late elderhood, forming an oppositional dynamic between familial lineage and peer cohort generations. For this reason, Strauss and Howe theorize that children and late elders may bond over generational similarities. “The most noticeable endowment neglect or reversal is likely to occur in the endowment activity associated with the generation currently passing beyond elderhood,”<sup>68</sup> and the terminus of their influence on culture creates a void that the young

62 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 351.

63 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 33.

64 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 97: “It never matters as much where a generation is as where it is going.”

65 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 368.

66 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 39.

67 Strauss and Howe note that two generations produce most of the offspring at a time, but the elder generation tends to lead the era’s approach to child rearing.

68 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 372.

generation must rise to fill. Children are thus inclined toward a life path that mirrors that of their grandparents, as a “generation isn’t like the generation that shaped [it], but it has much in common with *the generation that shaped the generation that shaped [it]*. Archetypes do not create archetypes like themselves; instead, they create the shadows of archetypes like themselves.”<sup>69</sup> When this principle plays out across the generations, “the oscillations within a cycle are greater than the differences across a full cycle,”<sup>70</sup> analogous to an octave. This Heraclitan dynamic of *entiodromia* explain why “the story of civilization seldom moves in a straight line, but is rich with curves, oscillations, and mood shifts. The ebb and flow of history often reflect the ebb and flow of generations”<sup>71</sup> that regulate the velocity of social change through continual minor readjustment, balancing “between risk and caution, reflection and activity, [and] passion and reason,”<sup>72</sup> making “the cycle of generations a powerful force for rejuvenation, a balance wheel for human progress.”<sup>73</sup>

Of course, history shows that the rise of peer cohort generational dynamics is no guarantee of a social cycle’s perpetuity. The disequilibrium of dynamical social orders has often led to a dependence on founders and their peer generation to maintain civic stability; without their hard-fought wisdom or successive generations’ first-hand experience of their efforts, their creations would often not survive their passing. The cycle winds down: no rising generation takes up the call for recreating the social order of those passing, no Great Event arises to catalyze progress, or else it overwhelms the collective, leading to collapse, often four generations from the cycle’s origins. At the same time, this is the inevitable risk and opportunity of progress, as the “dynamic of generational aging and dying enables a society to replenish its memory and evolve over time,”<sup>74</sup> producing the correspondence of individual life cycles and that of the collective, *social cycles*, both embodied by Strauss and Howe’s preferred Etruscan term, the *saeculum*. Otherwise, “without human death, memories would never die, and unbroken habits and customs would strangle civilization.”<sup>75</sup> In turn, society may undergo a rebirth should a novel

69 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 79.

70 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 21.

71 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 39.

72 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 448.

73 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 373.

74 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 14.

75 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 21.

“constellation” of generations manage to cross the threshold of destiny and revolutionize what came before.

## Generational Cycles in the United States

As is the case with generational theory precedence, the elasticity of the social cycle is central to Strauss and Howe’s own theory. They emphasize the wheel of generations “is only approximate. If it were precise, it would show human events to occupy the simple, inorganic domain of physical time . . . Instead, the imprecise saeculum shows that society occupies the complex, organic domain of natural time.”<sup>76</sup> For example, Strauss and Howe point to the European Renaissance as the Great Event that initiated the social cycles of European progress, setting the stage for the eventual rise of the United States. For England in particular, they highlight the War of the Roses (1455-1487), the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588) and the Glorious Revolution (1688) as the Great Events that led up to the official birth of the first modern democratic nation-state (1776). Measuring these events by their end dates, we find time spaces of 101, 100, and 88 years respectively, exemplifying what is meant by a natural, opposed to a literal, century.

They nonetheless acknowledge the “important coincidence [that] lies at the heart of American history, a coincidence familiar to most historians. The timespans separating the three pivotal events of American history almost exactly match.”<sup>77</sup> In their own words:

Exactly eighty-five years passed *between the first Confederate shot on Fort Sumter and Pearl Harbor Day. Back up the story, and note that eighty-five years also passed between Fort Sumter and the Declaration of Independence.*

To explain this aberration, they argue that the United States has benefited from several variables in its favor. “Far more than the old world—with its tradition-shaped culture, hereditary

<sup>76</sup> Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 88.

elites, hierarchical religion, and habits of class deference—America has always been unusually susceptible to generational flux, to the fresh influence of each new set of youth come of age.”<sup>78</sup> This forward-facing openness to reinvention, “for pursuing linear progress, and for suppressing the cycles of nature,”<sup>79</sup> goes back to the country’s earliest English immigrants: “after Jamestown and the *Mayflower*, . . . the new world offered this opportunity to any person who could buy or borrow passage. . . . The promise of generational change is one reason why America has remained such a magnet to would-be immigrants worldwide.”<sup>80</sup> Additionally, the United States had geography on its side as “a single large society that has never had a powerful neighbor that, for centuries, has remained relatively isolated from foreign interference.”<sup>81</sup> For these reasons, Strauss and Howe suggest the United States represents a unique “scenario in which most of history’s ‘noise’ is suppressed.”<sup>82</sup>

In explicating this cycle further, we will turn to the fourfold “Turnings” or “Eras”<sup>83</sup> of the collective social cycle of the United States. The associated historical eras are summarized, examining the correlations of these periods with its rising generation who, in their summer of life, best exemplifies the mood of the era. Like generations and seasons, Turnings have no strict boundaries or definite periods of transition – the first frost of winter that ends autumn and the first hot day of summer after spring is uncertain, but the gestalt of these changes are undeniable.

We will begin with the types of Eras already discussed: periods during which the Great Events of a nation’s founding and rebirth occur: Fourth Turnings, or Secular Crises. These winters of history are remembered as periods when “the whole *res publica* seem[s] on the verge of disintegrating.”<sup>84</sup> During these times, collective problems decades in the making now force a reckoning, sparking widespread fear for personal and social survival. As the old civic order gives way, Americans must come together in “collective unity in the face of peril [to realize] sudden

78 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 37.

79 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 42.

80 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 95

81 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 42.

82 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 42.

83 In *The Fourth Turning*, they are termed Turnings; in *Generations*, Eras.

84 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 5.

institutional change or innovation.”<sup>85</sup> Duty and sacrifice for the greater good become necessary and expected, often forged in the crucible of total war, but always with “a major discontinuity or *ekpyrosis*,”<sup>86</sup> “distinguished not by the mere scale of the human destruction, though this will likely be high, but rather by a universal perception that an old global structure of politics has perished and a new one is born.”<sup>87</sup> “Government governs, community obstacles are removed, and laws and customs that resisted change for decades are swiftly shunted aside.”<sup>88</sup> Protections on children are at their highest as sex role distinctions grow. “Society now places total priority on establishing a consensus of good-versus-bad, right-versus-wrong [until it is] tired of moral crusades.”<sup>89</sup> “During and shortly after these periods, leaders [reshape] public institutions beyond earlier recognition. History turn[s], decisively.”<sup>90</sup>

Strauss and Howe cite several other academics who highlight the same crises as pivotal: Historians Charles and Mary Beard call the Civil War the “Second American Revolution” in their 1927 two-volume series, *The Rise of American Civilization*;<sup>91</sup> Carl Degler called the New Deal the “Third American Revolution” in his 1959 book, *Out of Our Past*.<sup>92</sup> Bruce Ackerman, in his 1991 book, *We the People: Foundations*, identifies “three great turning points of [American] constitutional history: the Founding, Reconstruction, and the New Deal”<sup>93</sup> The First Revolution split loyalists against revolutionaries; the Second Revolution was a conflagration of abolitionists against supporters of slavery; the Third Revolution pit rising totalitarian ideologies against liberal values.

85 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 88.

86 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 51.

87 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 38.

88 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 104.

89 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 372.

90 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 90.

91 Charles Beard and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization Vol. II* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1927) 52.

92 Carl Degler, *Out of Our Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959) 379.

93 Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991) 58.



Secular Crisis	Key Events
American Revolution (1773-1794)	Boston Tea Party (16 December 1773)
	Signing of the Declaration (4 July 1776)
	Ratification of the Constitution (15 March 1789)
Civil War (1860-1865)	South Carolina Secession (20 December 1860)
	Gettysburg Address (19 November 1863)
	Assassination of Abraham Lincoln (14 April 1865)
Great Depression/World War II (1929-1946)	Black Tuesday (29 October, 1929)
	Pearl Harbor Sunday (7 December 1941)
	D-Day (6 June 1944)

In opposition to the wintry Great Events of the Fourth Turnings, manifest conflagrations between heroes and villains favored in the study of history, there are also less self-evident Great Events that are equally instrumental to social progress: the summers of history, Second Turnings, or Spiritual Awakenings. During these periods, new individualistic values emerge and reorient culture, revitalizing what has become dull and soulless with a renewed moral framework in “a society-wide effort to recapture a feeling of spiritual authenticity.”<sup>94</sup> An Awakening makes “the outer world . . . trivial compared to the inner world”<sup>95</sup> as new spiritual agendas and social ideals are explored. Social experiments like revivals and communes grow common, as do campaigns for civil rights and protests against corruption or injustice. These movements update the “individualistic, pietistic, perfectionist, millenarian ideology” that “has from time to time been variously defined and explained to meet changing experience and contingencies in [American] history.”<sup>96</sup> Protections for children are at their lowest as adults explore their own development and loosen sex role distinctions.

94 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 92.

95 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 102.

96 William McLoughlin, *Rivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) xiv.

For the United States Second Turnings, Strauss and Howe borrow the term “Awakening” from historian William McLoughlin’s 1978 book, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, which dedicates a chapter each to the First (1730-1760), Second (1800-1830), Third (1890-1920), and Fourth (1960-1990) Awakenings in American history.<sup>97</sup> While diverging on the specific timeframes for these summery Great Events, Strauss, Howe, and McLoughlin, agree that the Puritan Awakening (1610-1640) led to a mass migration to the New World, instilling the American ethos of spiritual discovery unrestrained by tradition or unified authority more than a century before the country’s founding; the First Awakening forged a common evangelical identity among Protestants and unified people of all identities and status in the colonies in preparation for the American Rebellion; the Second brought abolitionism and Utopian communities whose influence culminated in escalating tensions that sparked the Civil War; the Third brought muckrakers, prohibitionists, and labor protests that laid the ground for the strong social programs of the New Deal; the Fourth, of living memory, produced civil rights protests, the environmental movement, and expansion of consciousness through the embrace of Eastern philosophies and mind-altering drugs.

As is the case with oppositional parent-child generations, the Great Events of the Second and Fourth Turnings represent “a reaction against the ossifying and dysfunctional roles forged by each generation during the earlier [Great Event]. As a result, the new [Great Event is] *opposite in type* from the one that came before.”<sup>98</sup> This marks the two-stroke oscillation in which the most profound reforms and revolutions of a nation take place, between works and faith, secular institutions and spiritual values, public action and private introspection. Through this opposition, the two fundamental halves of the human condition experience an upheaval in each other’s shadow, turning the wheel of progress; summery Awakenings are “nourished by the security and affluence of the old order it attack[s]”<sup>99</sup> while in the winter of Crisis a new order is founded with popular and elite normative values that have developed since the last Awakening.

97 McLoughlin, *Rivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, v.

98 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 72.

99 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 47.

Spiritual Awakening	Key Opening/Closing Events
Second Awakening (1822-1844)	Denmark Vesey's Slave Revolt (2 July, 1822)
	Nat Turner's Rebellion (21 August, 1831)
	Panic of 1837 (10 May 1837)
Third Awakening (1886-1908)	Haymarket Riot (4 May 1886)
	William J. Byran's Presidential Candidacy (3 November 1896)
	President William H. Taft's Election (3 November 1909)
Fourth Awakening (1964-1984)	Harlem Riot (16 July 1964)
	Watergate Scandal (9 August 1974)
	President Ronald W. Reagan's Re-Election (6 November 1984)

Strauss and Howe note that “ancient societies knew of” these “two basic types of generational sagas: one beginning with a martial or institutions-founding event, the other with a spiritual or values-founding event.”<sup>100</sup> Strauss and Howe reference the Biblical story of Exodus as an example of both, in which Moses founded the religion of the Jewish people, followed by forty years of wandering in the desert, half the length of a social cycle. During this time, those who “were too young to join Moses’ challenge against the Pharaoh, yet old enough to remember the enticing fleshpots of Egypt”<sup>101</sup> grew old as the fresh generation of Joshua and his peers emerged, who, in their young adulthood, took up arms in Canaan to found a nation for their people – a Great, institutions-founding Event.

Strauss and Howe cite other mythic and fictional examples of young heroes guided by impotent but shamanic elders through a perilous journey towards a courageous act that restores order: King Arthur and Merlin of Celtic myth; Frodo and Gandalf of *The Lord of Rings*; Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi of *Star Wars*. In all these cases, the valor of youth is tempered

100 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 87.

101 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 85.

by the wisdom of old age. In sharp contrast, the founding of religions occurs in “a world suffocating under mighty dynasties that have become oversecure and soul dead,”<sup>102</sup> where the insight of youth faces off against the hubris and complacency of elders: Abraham in Hammurabi’s Ur; Siddhartha renouncing his opulent royalty; Jesus before the Roman Pontius Pilate. In these cases, elders have “expansive wealth and rationalism, resplendent in power but bereft of values in [their] palatial city,”<sup>103</sup> impelling the young on a spiritual journey to experience the depths of the human condition. Upon return, these figures have “little worldly power but gifts of magic and access to the gods.”<sup>104</sup> These archetypal relationships speak to the common theme among generations who are young adults or elders at the time of Great Events, in the perfect phases of life to earn legacies as founders of civic and spiritual orders.

In the current United States generational cycle, the Boomer generation occupies the Idealist or Prophet generational role that comes of age during Second Turning Awakenings. They grew up without firsthand knowledge of the struggles of the Great Depression or World War II, and were raised indulgently with decreasing protection exemplified by Dr. Spock’s advice for youth’s development of internal values. As rising adults, they came to challenge the dominant GI generation’s worldly achievements’ shadow: staid conformity, race and gender segregation, and environmental devastation. In turn, they left a cultural imprint of riotous social movements, experiments with sex and drugs, and strong moral convictions. Two generations later, the Millennials were raised to occupy the Civic or Hero role of society and come of age during a Fourth Turning Crisis, experiencing increasing protection following the cultural burnout of the seventies and eighties and raised to be rational team players. As rising adults, to fulfill the cycle of history, Strauss and Howe predict that they must follow the principled elder stewardship of popular Boomers they call “Gray Champions” to fight righteous wars and vigorously build new rational institutions for renewed economic prosperity and a return of optimism to public life. Should the close of this social cycle end in glory, Boomer leadership will follow the likes of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt will be remembered as

102 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 75.

103 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 75.

104 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 75.

wise stewards inspiring and guiding the rebirth of the nation,<sup>105</sup> and Millennials for civic milestones of “public order, community purpose, friendly neighborhoods, dutiful families, benign science, and a rapidly ascending standard of living.”<sup>106</sup>

The Great Events of summer’s Awakenings and winter’s Crises may be the extremes that propel Promethean social revolution, but these dominant moments of a nation’s life also depend on the relative peace of the recessive eras between them, during which the upheavals of the Great Events are fully entrenched in culture and society. During these periods, civic emergency and spiritual radicalism become moments of triumphant spring or an abrupt cooling into autumn. The boundaries of these times are the reliefs of the Great Events, quarter-turns that form loose archetypal squares.

Should a Crisis be resolved, it is followed by a spring, the First Turning, or High, which “brings a renaissance to community life. With the new civic order in place, people want to put the Crisis behind them and feel content about what they have collectively achieved. Any social issues left unresolved by the Crisis must now remain so.”<sup>107</sup> Order and consensus built in the Crisis carries into the High, forming an era of commercial prosperity, institutional solidarity, strong families, and political stability. Protections on children begin to loosen, while sex role differentiation remains high. For all this Era’s peace and productivity, “people worry that, as a society, they can do everything but no longer feel anything,”<sup>108</sup> leading to the riotous revivals and righteousness of Awakenings.

These summers turn to the autumns of history, the Third Turning, an Unraveling, an end to the spiritual fervor that cools to a society-wide embrace of the liberating cultural forces set loose by the Awakening. “Content with what they have become individually, [Americans] vigorously assert an ethos of pragmatism, self-reliance, laissez-faire, and national (or sectional or ethnic) chauvinism.”<sup>109</sup> “Culture diversifies and grows sophisticated as collective problems are

105 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 96.

106 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 349.

107 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 101.

108 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 101.

109 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 103.

deferred;” people “live life to the fullest, consume off the past, and pursue individual ends.”<sup>110</sup> In its wake, public order deteriorates, cynicism rises, along with poverty and uncertainty about the future. Protections on children begin to increase in response to growing dysfunction, while sex roles are least differentiated. As is the case with the summers and winters, the springs and autumns have their own polarity, as Strauss and Howe observe “where the cyclical spring brings consensus, order, and stability, the autumn brings argument, fragmentation, and uncertainty.”<sup>111</sup>

As the generations in the summer and winter of their individual life cycles predominate in the summery and wintry Great Events of the collective social cycle, the generations who are in their summer and winter of life during the springs and autumns of society come to take on more recessive roles in the turning of history. They are either too young or old to participate directly in the catharsis of Great Events or through stewarding its direction, and are instead left to manage and endure these moments’ excesses.

Those born during the Crisis are identified as an Adaptive or Artist generation who are overprotected as the foundations of society are reformed, raised to cooperate with others and burdened with high expectations.”<sup>112</sup> Entering their summer of life, they are indebted to elder generations for the accomplishments that preceded them, pursuing mild reforms to the powerful institutions they inherit, only to be outshone by a rising Idealist generation that they try to emulate in their late adulthood. Buttressed by two powerful generations during an era of strong institutions, they “strive to speed up, complicate, and adorn their social environment”<sup>113</sup> through a genteel mastery of extant systems, cultivating expertise, acquiring credentials, and emphasizing due process in order to build a pluralistic consensus between institutional and moral integrity.

In contrast, those born during an Awakening are identified as a Reactive or Nomad generation, who are largely left to raise themselves, “burdened with low expectations”<sup>114</sup> as the adult world is embroiled in self-discovery. Entering their summer of life, their hard-scrabble

110 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 207.

111 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 42.

112 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 75.

113 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 75

114 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 75.

childhood produces a picaresque character that is cynical toward the high-mindedness of elder adults who scorn them, growing used to “fixing the messes and cleaning up the debris left by others.”<sup>115</sup> Entering late adulthood during a Crisis, “they strive to slow down, simplify, and brace their social environment”<sup>116</sup> by applying their cunning and survival skills toward softening the excesses of their righteous elders and obedient, civically-minded youngsters to make pragmatic “hard and fast choices without fretting much about what others think.”<sup>117</sup>

In living memory, Strauss and Howe vividly illustrate how the Adaptive Silent generation and Reactive Generation X occupied complementary roles in the Gulf War, writing how “Silent 60-year-olds assume[d] the complex, polysyllabic tasks: satellite communications, multilateral negotiations, peace-process evaluations. [Generation X] 20-year-olds prepare[d] for the brute, one-syllable jobs: sweat, hide, move, hit, kill.”<sup>118</sup> Harold Bloom’s 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, addresses Generation X’s apathy and disengagement, while Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s 2015 book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, addresses the nascent Adaptive Generation Z’s overprotection and anxiety. As predicted by generational type, the Silent generation is passing into their late elderhood as Generation Z enters a childhood of parallel qualities to these elders, destined to take up their role as mediators of the polarity of progress and revolution in American Life, should the Crisis of the 2020s be successfully resolved. President Joseph Biden is the first, and likely only, Silent generation president, a lifelong politician known for his record of bipartisan compromise.

## Conclusion

Whether the predictions of Strauss and Howe’s theory of generational cycles comes to pass remains to be seen. This decade offers a natural test of their premise, and even if the worst comes true and it is confirmed, there remains much work to make it in a respectable theory of social change.

115 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 326.

116 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 75.

117 Strauss and Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, 268.

118 Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 333.

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