

# The Future Is...Written?

Predicting societies sliding into chaos

Eric Laursen

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a review of

*End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration* by Peter Turchin. Penguin Press, 2023

Historian Arnold J. Toynbee once insisted that history is not “just one damn thing after another.”

Joe Strummer, lead singer of The Clash, once insisted that, “The future is unwritten.”

Somehow, it has always seemed to me that both statements are true. That’s why I’m neverendingly fascinated by theories that profess to find predictable patterns or cycles in human history, from the medieval Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun to Marx to Oswald Spengler’s 1918 *Decline of the West* to Toynbee’s own 12-volume *A Study of History*. None of their theories are right (whatever that means), or even broadly valid, but at their best they yield some useful insights about the road humanity is on and what we need to look out for going forward.

And as a genre, they have something to tell us about our modern era, when capitalism and the state are ever so anxious to convince us that they are the culmination and fulfillment of some rational course of human development and ever so eager to get ahead of some real or perceived historical trajectory that might swamp them: the “unknown unknowns,” as Bush’s Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it.

Peter Turchin, theoretical biologist-turned-social scientist, has been assembling the latest of these conceptual edifices for the last couple of decades. *End Times*, his forebodingly titled new book, is an attempt to distill his method and findings for a non-specialist audience. He is a project leader of something called the Complexity Science Hub in Vienna and the director of CrisisDB, which is described as “a massive historical database of societies sliding into chaos—and then emerging from it.” He calls himself a “collapsologist” (which inevitably put me in mind of the hot-shot scientist in Jurassic Park who refers to himself as a “chaotician”).

Turchin himself has been attracting attention since the tumultuous 2020 election and the MAGA insurgency at the Capitol the following January, because 10 years earlier, he had predicted that the US was “due for another sharp instability spike by the early 2020s.” “Sadly,” he notes in his new book, “nothing about my model has been disproved in the intervening years.”

He calls the discipline he claims to have invented “cliodynamics,” defining it as the interdisciplinary study of long-term historical processes, using “diverse mathematical models” and differential equations to do the analysis. For our data-obsessed age, cliodynamics is a perfect fit. Since 2003, it’s even had its own scholarly journal, which Turchin helped found.

I’m aware that I’m being a bit snide about Turchin’s work, which is serious and not badly intentioned. So, here’s what he does that is useful and worth thinking about. To tease out a cycle in historical events and trends, he looks for proxies that can stand for larger trends in wealth distribution, health, and other indicators. He looks at statistics on average height, infant mortality, and lifespan, for example, as proxies for health, and numbers on relative wages—the differential between, say, compensation for Jeff Bezos and an Amazon warehouse worker—as a proxy for the wealth gap.

These numbers, and many others, are meant to help us gauge how stable or unstable a society might be: how close it is to a crisis, such as a collapse of the ruling class, a set of economic arrangements, or even an entire state. “The goal of cliodynamics,” Turchin tells us, “is to integrate all important forces of history, whether they are demographic, economic, social, cultural or ideological.”

His team has identified 300 cases of crisis, from the Neolithic era to the present, for which they have “good data” on about 100 so far. These range from the American Civil War to the decline and fall of imperial China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the fall of the Roman Empire to the decline of Mamluk Egypt in the late Middle Ages. Some times—in one in five cases—crises are averted. Other times, cultures undergo a period of disorder, then reconstitute themselves; other times, they fall apart entirely.

Just like Ibn Khaldun and Spengler before him, Turchin describes a pattern of birth, growth, maturity (“Golden Age), and “times of troubles” for the societies he studies, and in every case, three factors contribute to the latter. First and foremost is “overproduction of elites,” meaning there are too many educated, qualified people vying for too few positions in the national elite, leading to factionalism and eventually elite breakdown. Second is “popular immiseration,” which occurs when a predatory class puts a system in place that transfers wealth into its hands from the rest of the population: something Turchin calls the “wealth pump.”

The third ingredient—really a product of the other two—is “failing fiscal health and weakened legitimacy of the state.” The state can’t pay for its vital activities, including maintaining infrastructure and providing welfare and other services that help maintain living standards, and the population loses faith in its promises. Putting together the data on all three of these factors, Turchin creates a “political stress index” that tells us when any of them has gone out of kilter.

The current period in the US certainly displays all three ingredients of a society in crisis, down to the split in the national ruling class between the more traditional elements and a Trumpist counter-elite, and some of the data Turchin uses to back this up are startling. We know that wages in America have been mostly stagnating for decades, for instance, but he gives us some perspective on how bad the situation really is, finding that since the 1960s, relative wages have declined in a more sustained manner than in any period since the three decades from 1830 to 1860.

Ultimately, however, the core audience for cyclical models like Turchin’s is not us but the elite, a fact that has not escaped him. “They get it,” he said in a 2019 interview about Silicon Valley billionaires who seek him out, “but then they have two questions: How can they make money out of the situation? And when should they buy their plot in New Zealand?”

This suggests the deeper problem with his model, and with the analysis he poses in *End Times*. Human liberation and a thriving natural world are of no concern to him here. The objective is to show how societies become disrupted and

fall into cycles of violence. Abolishing the wealth pump and ending immiseration are fine and even necessary things to pursue, but because they strengthen social bonds and restore stability and faith in the elite, not because they are good in and of themselves. Despotism or democracy, it doesn’t matter: stability is the objective.

One of Turchin’s primary suggestions for getting rid of the wealth pump is questionable as well. “Massive immigration” needs to be squeezed off, he writes, sounding a lot like Donald Trump, because it drives down wages and thus “disadvantages workers.” But what about the effect this would have on the global distribution of wealth and the relative immiseration of workers elsewhere? Wouldn’t it create further instability in other parts of the global economy, with blowback sure to follow?

Although he seldom uses the word, the stability Turchin seems most deeply concerned with is that of the state, be it the American plutocracy, the Chinese or Russian despotisms, or the Nordic social democracies. And, for him, states can’t do without governing elites.

“All large-scale, complex societies have ruling classes,” Turchin writes, and complex human societies need elites—“rulers, administrators, thought leaders—to function well. We don’t want to get rid of them; the trick is to constrain them to act for the benefit of all.” That’s why he tags overproduction of elites, and instability in their ranks, as the key destabilizing factor. A disaffected populace, manifested in popular insurgencies, organized labor, and self-organized communities, are symptoms of the problem, not the foundation of a new, more equitable society.

Today, thanks in part to many new findings on neolithic culture and the evidence accumulated from the many attempts to establish societies outside the state in modern times, we know that Turchin is wrong; large-scale, complex societies do not need to be organized under an elite. We also know, from some of the evidence Turchin himself discusses, that constraining some portion of the elite to address a crisis and work in the public interest is the rarest of things. “The iron law of oligarchy,” as he calls it, “states that when an interest group acquires a lot of power, it inevitably starts using this power in a self-interested way.”

The purpose of the study of cliodynamics, Turchin says, is to show us how to eliminate or minimize humanity’s periods of violence and instability. But the evidence suggests that the best way to do so is to get rid of the state and capitalism, not attempt to tame them.

Eric Laursen writes frequently for the *Fifth Estate*.

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