End Times:
Elites, Counter Elites, and the Path to Political Disintegration
Peter Turchin
Allen Lane: London, 2023, £25.00 (h/b)

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Troubles Ahead

In the face of increasing political turmoil, there are the same choices for writers as there are for everyone else: fight or flight. For writers, on the one hand, that can involve keeping your head down, finding comfort in obscure corners and eschewing controversial claims; or, on the other, coming out swinging.

Peter Turchin is a political refugee from Russia, and judging by his photo on the dust jacket, no shrinking violet. Neither does he disavow science. He is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Connecticut and Research associate at the University of Oxford, while running the Complexity Science Hub in Vienna. His speciality is as a complexity scientist and his claim is to have developed, with others, a vast historical database of historical events across the globe and across millennia, which he uses to model future scenarios. This has been a gradual process that has gained credibility[1] by enabling him and his associates to confidently predict the political turmoil in the USA and other places during recent years.

The dust jacket describes the book as a 'brilliant new theory of everything from one of the most iconoclastic thinkers of our time. It purports to answer the questions: What leads to political turbulence and social breakdown? How do elites maintain their dominant position? And why do ruling classes sometimes suddenly lose their grip on power?'

His method has been, for decades, to study 10,000 years of human activity, and then develop new models to learn from the past. *End Times* is the result, purporting to account for how society works (and to predict the future).

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[1] Back in 2010, when *Nature* magazine asked leading scientists to provide a ten-year forecast, Turchin used his models to predict that America was in a spiral of social disintegration that would lead to a breakdown in the political order circa 2020. The years since have proved his prediction more and more accurate, and *End Times* reveals why.
<https://www.nature.com/articles/463026a>

The lessons are clear, it is claimed: when the balance of power between the ruling classes and the majority tips too far in favour of the elites, income inequality surges. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. As more people try to join the elite, frustration with the establishment brims over, often with disastrous consequences. Elite overproduction led to state breakdown – in imperial China, in medieval France, in the American Civil War – and it is happening now.

Turchin's models, however, are not a mere joining of the dots of past events but, it is claimed, can 'light the way to a brighter future' by drawing on insights drawn from occasions in the past where balance has been restored.

Jared Diamond and British economist Angus Deaton [2] provide testimonials to his attempt to make the future predictable by applying a scientific analysis to history.

Tim Evans in the *Guardian* reviewed the book on 28 May 2023[3] and adds further context by referring to his previous books and to 'cliodynamics', the name Turchin gives to his method:

> In a series of books – *War and Peace and War* (2006) and *The Ages of Discord* (2016) – he has used his datasets to try to establish the basis on which all human civilisations in the era of cities and states have the mechanisms of their own destruction built-in. He not only endeavours to show that complex mathematics might unlock those derailing forces, but also how it might help to avert them.

Evans explains:

> . . . the Complexity Science Hub in Vienna, established a project called Seshat (named after the Egyptian goddess of archives). Seshat involves scores of expert collaborators – anthropologists, archaeologists, historians – in building the world's largest collection of data on the prosperity and demise of societies from upper Egypt to lower Manhattan. While acknowledging that all findings are inevitably a work in progress, Turchin extrapolates certain cyclical trends in this great collected narrative of human hope and human failure.
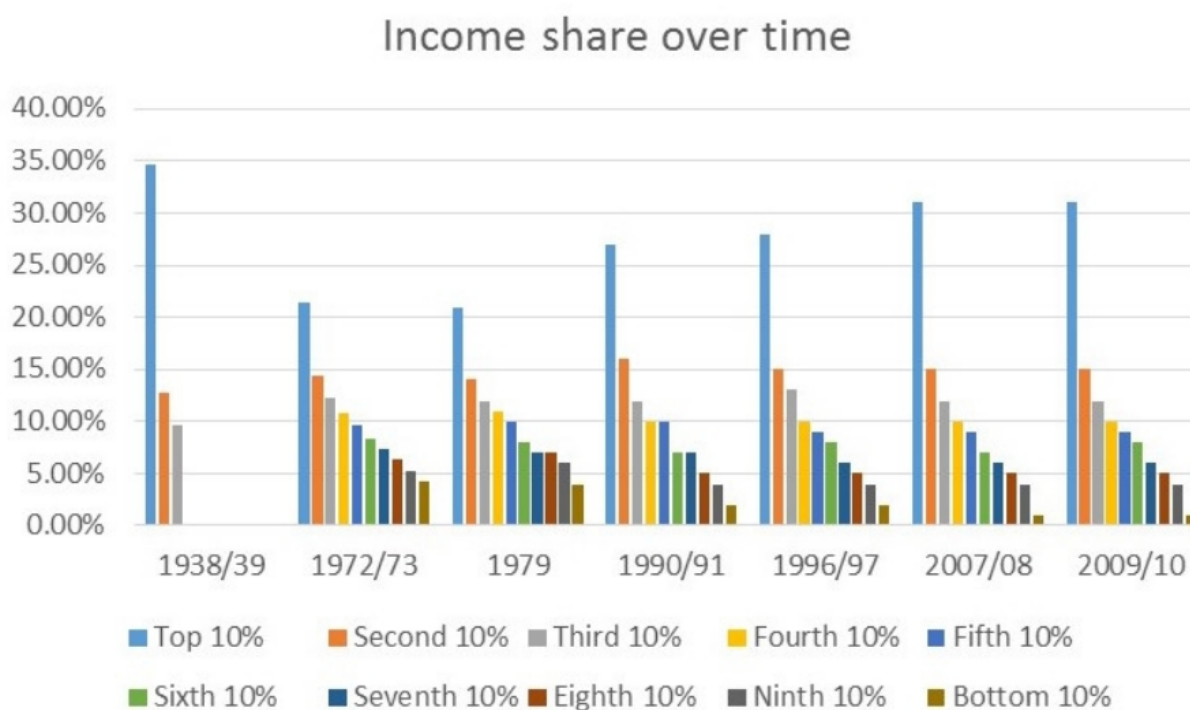>
> The most common pattern he presents is "an alternation of

[2] Author of *Author of Economics in America: An Immigrant Economist Explores the Land of Inequality* – due to be published later this year by Princeton University Press in the U.S.. See <https://tinyurl.com/yp94ffpm> or <https://www.amazon.com/Economics-America-Immigrant-Economist-Inequality/dp/0691247625/>.

[3] <https://tinyurl.com/25c23cbr> or <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/may/28/end-times-by-peter-turchin-review-elites-counter-elites-and-path-of-political-disintegration-can-we-identify-cyclical-trends-in-narrative-of-human-hope-and-failure>

integrative and disintegrative phases lasting for roughly a century". His predictions have a special urgency because western societies, and particularly America, are, he suggests, very near the end of that latter disintegrative phase, which makes the likelihood of civil war or potential systemic collapse far more likely. His model attempts to weight certain factors to predict this social meltdown. Key among them are rapidly growing inequality of wealth and wages, an overproduction of potential elites – children of wealthy dynasties, graduates with advanced degrees, frustrated social commentators – and an uncontrolled growth in public debt. In the US, he suggests – and by association the UK – these "factors started to take an ominous turn in the 1970s . . . The data pointed to the years around 2020 when the confluence of these trends was expected to trigger a spike in political instability. And here we are."

No one can deny that inequality is rising and has been since the watershed of the 1970's. The Equality Trust has a neat chart that summaries this for the UK.[4]

This shows that since the 1970s the share of national income going to the top 10% has increased by c.50%, at the same time as national income to the bottom 10% has decreased by c.75%, and to the bottom 30% by c.33%.

In the USA in 1983 there were 66,000 households worth at least $10m.

4   <https://equalitytrust.org.uk/how-has-inequality-changed>

By 2019, that number had increased in terms adjusted for inflation to 693,000. While those numbers of the super-rich increased, so the income and wealth of the typical American declined.

Again in Evans words:

> This trend has coincided with the second major destabilising factor, what Turchin defines as the "overproduction of elites", in which an ever greater number of people compete over a finite and increasingly corrupt structure of privilege and power. He offers four factions between which this competition for status is perennially played out: militaristic, financial, bureaucratic and ideological. As societies decline the balanced equation of these factions falls wildly out of balance. The forces of capital seek to destroy the voices of ideology – one "elite" arms itself against another in a series of real wars or culture wars – and things fall apart. The strength of applying these metrics in an "objective" way across a multitude of historical situations, Turchin argues, is that general principles emerge. "The goal of cliodynamics," he argues, "is to integrate all important forces of history, whether they are demographic, economic, social, cultural or ideological."

The good news is that Turchin readily identifies two previous eras in which elites managed the potential for political turmoil to good effect. In the UK during the 1820s up to the 1860s, when parliamentary democracy was extended to help manage the violent disturbances of the time. In the USA he identifies the New Deal and the period up to the 1970s, when priority was given to sharing the benefits of industrialisation and wealth creation throughout society.

He thus calls not for the abolition of elites or their replacement. Rather he draws attention to periods when history has swept them away on the one hand and others when they have reacted to events to change tack to avert disaster.

Is anyone listening?

The publisher sums it up thus:[5]

> When the equilibrium between ruling elites and the majority tips too far in favour of elites, political instability is all but inevitable. As income inequality surges and prosperity flows disproportionately into the hands of the elites, the common people suffer, and society-wide efforts to become an elite grow ever more frenzied. He calls this process the wealth pump; it's a world of the damned and the saved. And since the

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[5] <https://penguinrandomhousehighereducation.com/book/?isbn=9780593490501>

number of such positions remains relatively fixed, the overproduction of elites inevitably leads to frustrated elite aspirants, who harness popular resentment to turn against the established order. Turchin's models show that when this state has been reached, societies become locked in a death spiral it's very hard to exit.

In America, the wealth pump has been operating full blast for two generations. As cliodynamics shows us, our current cycle of elite overproduction and popular immiseration is far along the path to violent political rupture. That is only one possible end time, and the choice is up to us, but the hour grows late.

You can hear Turchin speak for himself on a podcast.[6] He warns that the potential for upheaval in 2024 around the next US Election remains very high.

Turchin reveals an eye for the detail, as well as the bigger picture. For example, he examines various health and population data – e.g. heights(revealed in bone samples and medical records), lifespans and mortality rates. Using these, he can readily identify that rising US social and political problems are correlated to the medical data. This in turn provides an explanation for why the UK – where previously positive health trends observed for a very long time are reversing, as immiseration of the poor increases – may be following the same path.

His strengths are, however, in dissecting what is happening amongst the American elites. He cites Mark Mizruchi from the 2013 book *The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite,* which claims this elite was unified, moderate and pragmatic in the post-war era but has become fragmented in recent decades. Charitable foundations are pushing extreme ideological agendas. The 'policy–obstruction network' of the Koch Brothers, the Mercer family and others 'attack all government programs and impugn the motives of all public officials'. For example, the Heartland Institute seeks to undermine and sow doubt on the scientific basis for climate change. Millions are spent on training judges in right-wing bias (via the Federalist Society). There are increasing disputes between progressive public law officials and right-wing police departments, which it is claimed have been infiltrated by groups of right-wing extremists. Those, in turn, have been infiltrated by the FBI, who act as provocateurs to

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6 <https://tinyurl.com/5a662bdu> or <https://www.wamc.org/podcast/the-roundtable/2023-07-17/end-times-elites-counter-elites-and-the-path-of-political-disintegration-by-peter-turchin>

entrap and prosecute radicalised extremists.[7] As a former Russian dissident, Turchin has a sharp eye for the treatment of US dissidents: left-wing dissidents are ignored by the media whereas right-wing dissidents have infiltrated and taken over the Republican Party and some of the media. The latter focuses on social issues designed to divide (race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+, intersectionality) rather than on populist economic issues or criticisms of militarism.

Useful for UK readers are summaries of the Trump political positions (populist, anti-immigration, anti-war, socially conservative); how these differ from traditional elite positions (which prefer aloof government, pro-immigration policies, pro-military adventurism abroad, and are prepared to allow social liberal positions); and how these differ in turn from Steve Bannon's ideas[8] (the big difference being Bannon's desire to pull the system down); and those of Tucker Carlson (the most popular right-wing political commentator on the US media before his abrupt sacking by Fox News).

Turchin has most time for Carlson who, he grants, has written a clearly formulated and coherent ideology in his *Ship of Fools: How a Selfish Ruling Class Is Bringing America to the Brink of Revolution* (London: Free Press/ Simon and Schuster, 2018). On p. 217 Turchin summarises Carlson's position as accusing the Democrats of

- becoming a party of the rich;
- of supporting immigration because immigrants vote Democrat;
- of supporting overseas military adventurism;
- of attacking free speech;
- of not taxing the wealthy or asking why working people are dying younger.

Above all Carlson attacks the ruling class, the destruction of society and promotes 'replacement theory' – the idea that Democrats promote immigration because it will shift the national demography in favour of the Democratic Party.

He was denounced as a racist and held out against campaigns to have him sacked until Rupert Murdoch sacked him. Rupert is a good judge of the political winds . . . .

But Turchin's book ends with the future hanging seemingly in the balance.

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[7] See the discussion of the plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan on p. 209. It turns out that the idea was proposed to 'the plotters' by an FBI agent. 'Nearly half of the paramilitary group that planned to kidnap, put on trial, and execute Whitmer (the governor of Michigan) were feds or informers'.

[8] The Wikipedia page gives a good account of the impulsive Steve Bannon, who would be in prison for stealing money raised to 'build the Wall' but for a pardon from Trump. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Bannon>

Will the population succumb to the relentless criticisms of the Democrats (most of which can be easily supported by left-wing critics of the Democrats) and will right-wing extremists take over the Republican Party?

Turchin puts it like this:

> The American ruling class today finds itself in the predicament that has recurred thousands of times throughout human history. [. . . .] The technical term for it is a "revolutionary situation". For the ruling class, there are two routes out of a revolutionary situation. One leads to their overthrow. The alternative is to adopt a series of reforms that will rebalance the social system, reversing the trends of popular immiseration and elite overproduction. (pp. 221-222*)*

His final words:

> 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.

Turchin is therefore on the side of the angels. But is he guided by science, or merely good intentions? He would have it the former (he disavows political partisanship – at least in his podcast). Claims to be able to predict the course of history have been made before, only for history to take another course. Claims for the 'End of History' following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 have not gone according to plan. Turchin acknowledges this potential criticism and addresses it in a 20 page Appendix 1, devoted to the new science of history. His response can be summed up in one word 'data'. Only now is it possible to assemble and analyse data on historical events to the extent required for reliable results.

In Appendix 2 (22 pages) he describes how historical knowledge has traditionally been painstakingly gained from analysing fragments of pottery, old bones and samples of air and seeds extracted from ancient ice samples; and from the earliest records of births deaths and marriages. The issue now is how best to deal with the explosion in data available for analysis. He describes the incremental process of assembling data, coding, checking and formulating questions. He recounts that the focus of his studies within the Seshat project, and its offshoot CrisisDB, is to focus attention on the 300 examples of crisis, spanning from the Neolithic period to the present and located in all major continents of the world. The goal is to test not only theories about why societies go into crisis but also – and equally importantly – to understand why some exits from crisis may have been relatively benign but others were truly horrible. This is described as a long and arduous process with work only completed on 100 of the 300 cases. But patterns have emerged and are shared

in this book.

In his final Appendix 3 he clearly demarcates his team's approach from that of the vast majority of historians. He portrays amateur historical accounts of the past as being guilty of 'cherry picking', choosing only examples that fit pet theories; or of using 'the Bed of Procrustes', which enables them – by stretching it a little here, cutting off a bit there – to force various historical examples to conform to fixed cycles postulated by theories. He claims 99% of cyclic history is suffering from one or more of these problems.

His text is littered with references to distinguished studies and appears highly credible. But readers are put in the position of either accepting plausible theories or rejecting them. The worry is that those doing the rejecting may be those with most to lose, in the short term. The explicit threat to existing elites is that failure to respond may lead to something worse than minor costs down the line.

On the other hand

Other reviews[9] regard it as too short, too vague and too unoriginal to justify its grand claims. The review in the *New Statesman* by William Davies is dismissive:

> The climax of the book, the money shot of this whole exercise, occurs on page 200: 'Now that we have the MPF[10] engine [Turchin's model, still not really explained by this point], let's use it to investigate the possible trajectories that the American social system could take beyond the 2020s.' Finally, after considerable limbering up, the main event arrives.
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> Spoiler alert: MPF's big reveal is disappointing. 'Elite over-production' and 'popular immiseration' will continue through the 'turbulent Twenties', producing greater and greater violence. Yet the effect of this violence is, counter-intuitively, to turn 'radicals' into 'moderates', until the country calms down for 40 years before erupting again in 2070. The problem, Turchin explains, and the reason why society will become unstable every 50 years is the 'wealth pump', which continues to divert money from the poor to the rich. Only with the kinds of liberal reforms witnessed in Britain in the late 19th century, or the US after 1929, will the 'wealth pump' be switched off and political instability put to rest.
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> Rather like Deep Thought, the super-computer in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, CrisisDB and MPF appear to have been fed the

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9 For example, by Charlie Baker for the 'Wealth Management & Luxury Lifestyle' magazine *Spear's*: <https://spearswms.com/luxury/art-culture/book-review-end-times-peter-turchin/>.

10 MPF is an abbreviation of Multi-path Forecasting and is discussed on p. 192

most fundamental, existential questions of politics, and answered with a banality: moderate redistribution or barbarism. More than once, I wondered if this whole project was a hoax. (If rationalists can pull pranks on critical theory journals by sending in fake papers to see if they get published, why shouldn't critical theorists do the same to *Nature*?)

Who really needs *End Times*, when one can read the sweeping historical work of Piketty, Arrighi or Eric Hobsbawm instead? This is TED-Talk-lit that so vastly over-promises that the under-delivery is baked in from the start. The insistence that nothing can escape statistical model-building is ultimately a power grab, a determination to own and to control, not just the future but also adjacent scholarly disciplines. As Theodor W Adorno wrote of philosophical system-builders, this is a symptom of the 'belly turned mind'.

My riposte on Turchin's behalf is that internal divisions amongst the US elites – described in depth in *End Times* and now playing out within the Republican Party – have not been properly considered by Davies. Nor has he considered that the influence of John C Calhoun[11] on neo-liberal theorists and politicians has never been greater (as Nancy MacLean explained in *Democracy in Chains*[12]) and is being played out in politics today. (Calhoun was the architect of the Civil War in America, whose repercussions still resonate deeply in US society and politics.)

Thus readers of Piketty, Angus Deaton and Anne Case[13] may not be surprised that inequality is one of the ingredients in the political powder keg; but like any explosive mix it's the combination of elements that's important – not just the spark.

The purpose of the book, Davies needs reminding, is not to describe history but instead to send a warning shot to the ruling class. Turchin recognises both the potential criticisms of his work, and that his work is incomplete and can be refined. If that work shows flashing red lights and a potential explosion in 2024 around the next US Presidential Election, no one would thank Turchin for informing us after the event.

History is a lived experience and can be influenced by those involved.

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11 <https://www.historynet.com/john-c-calhoun-the-man-who-started-the-civil-war/>

12 Reviewed in *Lobster* 77 at <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhu7t9> or <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/77/democracy-in-chains-the-deep-history-of-the-radical-rights-stealth-plan-for-america-by-nancy-maclean/>.

13 See, for example, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/american-capitalism-no-excuses-for-deaths-of-despair-by-anne-case-and-angus-deaton-2021-12>.

There is always uncertainty, lack of data and knowledge, which academic historians struggle to overcome. A ruling class are not academic historians and there is no harm in warning them that events can turn nasty, or that timely remedial action can avoid that.

Yes, we have all heard talk of revolutionary situations before, and it's easy to make fun of over excitable, immature politicians as would be stormers of barricades. But the book is not addressed at them. It dismisses left dissidents as having minimal influence in the USA at present – which is happening increasingly in the UK and across Europe as well. Meanwhile right-wing dissidents lack a coherent organisational base and they are infiltrating the existing Republican Party and police departments an attempt to change that. But the red lights are flashing and, as they used to say, 'the concrete analysis of the concrete situation' points to trouble not very far down the track.

The appeal of the book is to those among the ruling elites who are in the best position to know what is going on. Most may be motivated by extracting as much short term reward from their position in society, but the wiser heads may take the messages of this book on board. It is not too late to act. It's been done in the past to good long term effect. They have nothing to lose but everything.

Where I think Turchin could have said more, is in explaining what reversing the over production of the elites would mean in practice. It could mean restricting access to elite positions even more than presently. But I don't think he means that. In the past it meant exporting young men on the make to the colonies. I don't think he means that either. It's obviously a version of the New Deal, with new public missions and a wider engagement. But little is said.

In a rather more welcoming review,[14] *The Economist* does speculate on what policies might be to address over production of elites.

> In the early 20th century American reformers raised inheritance taxes to prevent the emergence of a hereditary aristocracy, and engaged in massive trust-busting. Modernising urban-planning systems could lower housing costs, and deregulating labour markets would help create good jobs for "excess" elites.

David Goodhart in his *TLS* review[15] refers to the cleansing effect of the extermination of a the French military elite at the Battle of Crecy by English archers. Many of our elite may not want to hear that . . . . His balanced review

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[14] <https://tinyurl.com/2s465su4> or <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2020/10/22/can-too-many-brainy-people-be-a-dangerous-thing>

[15] <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-end-times-peter-turchin-book-review-david-goodhart/> or <https://tinyurl.com/mpkkc2fm>

concludes by paying tribute to the book being crammed with striking facts and characters, and for providing a different interpretation of the war in Ukraine. (Turchin focusses on intra-elite differences within Ukraine, rather than conflict with Russia – whose GDP per capita was three times greater than the Ukraine's – implying that the conflict has actually been driven by these internal wealth differentials.) Goodhart at least enjoyed the book, while remaining sceptical of the scientific claims.

Take it with a pinch of salt but it's a book worth reading and worth acting on. It's often the case that well considered warnings are the ones we really need to notice.