



richardheinberg.com

MuseLetter #364 / July 2023 by Richard Heinberg

Are these the end times?

Peter Turchin's latest book, [*End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration*](#), is receiving [glowing reviews](#). Its message is highly relevant to our collective understanding of the emerging global polycrisis and what needs to be done to minimize it. Turchin began his career as an evolutionary biologist, analyzing large datasets to clarify patterns in population dynamics in insects and other organisms. Throughout the last 25 years, he has applied these analytical methods to questions having to do with changes in human societies over time, a study to which he and his colleagues have given the name [cliodynamics](#) (after Clio, the Muse of history). Turchin, who now refers to himself as a complexity scientist, is an emeritus professor at the University of Connecticut, a project leader at the Complexity Science Hub in Vienna, and a research associate at the University of Oxford. I was delighted when Peter consented to engage with me in an emailed interview about his most recent book.

RH: Thank you, Peter, for writing this important and timely book. As you know, I've been following your work for several years, and I discussed it in my own recent book, [*Power: Limits and Prospects for Human Survival*](#). The data-driven, mathematical methods you and your colleagues have developed for understanding patterns in history seem highly illuminating. In the US, rising economic inequality (since the 1970s) has immiserated the working class, while the number of elites (e.g., billionaires) and elite aspirants (e.g., people with law degrees) has skyrocketed. As you show in detail, these developments align with a historical pattern seen repeatedly in complex societies, and it never seems to end well. In *End Times*, you lay out clearly what your analysis means for the United States in the 2020s. It's not a pretty picture. And indeed, we're seeing the evidence of increasing polarization and political ill will everywhere.

PT: Thank you for the kind words about my book, Richard!

RH: Your book reminded me of the terrible irony of the enduring worship of Ronald Reagan by populist Republicans—whose voter base now largely consists of working-class people whose prospects have been repeatedly undermined (starting in the Reagan era) by Republican-led tax cuts on high-income Americans. In effect, the US economy is now a “wealth pump” that gives to the rich and takes from the poor. As you point out, Democratic leaders (with exceptions such as Elizabeth Warren) have also largely turned a blind eye to the economic interests of the working class as they align

themselves increasingly with urban voters with high incomes and education levels. Due to this evolution in the two parties, there seems to be little support among government leaders for the kinds of policies that might tend to defuse the country's political crisis—higher taxes on the rich and a higher minimum wage. [According to David Leonhardt, writing in the *New York Times*](#), a few populist Republican politicians (including Marco Rubio and J. D. Vance) are now calling for higher taxes on the super-wealthy. Do you see this as a significant shift? And if it is significant, how might it help sort out (or further scramble) our country's politics?

PT: Indeed, by 2016 the Democratic Party had largely completed its evolution from a party of the working classes to the party of the “10 percent”—successful, educated, urbanized Americans. As Thomas Frank wrote in *Listen, Liberal* (2016), with the Republicans traditionally reflecting the interest of the wealthiest 1 percent, 90 percent of Americans were left without effective representation. Popular discontent, driven by decades of stagnating—and even declining—wages, especially for workers without college education, was first harnessed by Donald Trump, which propelled him to the presidency. As you note, there are now several populist politicians, whose professed goal is to remake the Republican Party into a party of the working class. Whether they succeed in this, and how sincere they are in reversing the decades of anti-working-class policies, remain to be seen. But, in any case, this movement represents a significant shift in this country's political landscape.

As I discuss in detail in *End Times*, the most important thing we need to do, in order to find a solution to the crisis in which we find ourselves, is shut down the perverse wealth pump, which has been, since the late 1970s, taking from the poor and giving to the rich. Most obviously, accomplishing this will allow wages and incomes of the majority of Americans to again increase together with economic growth, as they did during the period following the New Deal (and until the 1970s). Even more importantly, this will eventually reverse the overproduction of the uber-wealthy and elite aspirants with advanced degrees, which, as I explain in the book, are the most dangerous drivers of political instability, especially when combined with immiseration. Until the wealth pump is shut down, America will continue to experience social and political turbulence, which at any point could spiral to levels that would transform our current “cold” civil war into a hot one.

RH: *End Times* is all about social structures—the economy, the political system, the military, the media, and the educational system. But social dysfunction is hardly the only kind of crisis facing America, or humanity in general, this century. Most people are justifiably concerned about climate change, and many ecologists also warn about the consequences of resource depletion and continued population growth. The energy subsidy that humanity has derived from fossil fuels has enabled a massive escalation of everything we do, but the evidence (whether framed in terms of [ecological footprint](#) or [planetary boundaries](#)) suggests that we're exceeding the planet's long-term carrying capacity. The implications of that are frightening enough. Do you see social collapse as more imminent and therefore a more important subject of discussion—particularly in the US?

PT: The ecological crises and political crises are not separate. Thus, a spike in food prices has been a common trigger of revolutions and other outbreaks of

political violence. Most recently this was seen in the Arab Spring of 2010–12, and even more recently in the French riots of 2023. Conversely, solving global crises requires cooperation of humans at large scales—at the global level, in fact. Yet, political disintegration within countries undermines our ability to cooperate at needed scales. This is most obvious when we consider American politics. Here, how to deal with global change, or even whether it is a real crisis, has become one of the divisive issues used by different political factions against each other.

RH: China has seen rapid growth in wealth inequality too, especially since 1990. Does China’s elite overproduction also signal trouble? Are “end times” likely to occur later in China than in the US, and is that country likely to follow a different trajectory?

PT: China has emerged from its previous “age of discord” much more recently than the USA (and Western Europe). Analysis by my research group of CrisisDB, a database of more than a hundred past societies sliding into crisis (and then emerging from it), suggests that China still has time to deal with the negative trends you mention. In my opinion, thus, China is likely to enter its own End Times decades later than the US. However, I should note that a proper cliodynamic analysis of contemporary China has not yet been done, and that’s what would be needed for a more solid, empirically buttressed answer to your question.

RH: The Russia-Ukraine war has already had economic and geopolitical ripple effects globally. The fact that you grew up in the USSR perhaps gives you a perspective on the conflict that’s different from most US commentators. Combining that perspective with your historical analysis, is there anything on this subject you would like to impart to readers that you didn’t say in the book?

PT: As it happens, I am currently working on an article that will be posted in several installments on my blog (<https://peterturchin.com/cliodynamica/>), which will provide an answer to this question.

RH: As an American, I’m deeply saddened and concerned (though not entirely surprised) to read that you don’t see any way to fully defuse the strong likelihood of further US internal political violence in the 2020s (on page 202, you write that “it is too late to avert our current crisis,” though we could “avoid the next period of social breakdown in the second half of the twenty-first century.”). You offer some advice for political elites in that regard. But is there anything ordinary citizens can do to reduce the trend toward polarization and violence over the short term?

PT: Speaking for myself, the most effective way I can help is simply continue my work as a scientist attempting to better understand societal dynamics. Although we made great steps in understanding the structural factors driving “end times” in our societies, our theories, models, and data can be greatly improved. Such understanding, in my opinion, is key for developing effective reforms and policies that can take us on a better course out of this crisis. Beyond making science better we need a broad public discussion of its implications, and of what needs to be done. Ordinary citizens can help by educating themselves on these issues, by participating in the discussion of possible remedies, and ultimately by putting pressure on our ruling elites to

act in ways that benefit the people broadly, rather than (as they've been acting over the past few decades) in their own narrow and shortsighted personal interest.