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## BOOK REVIEW

Turchin, P. (2023). *End Times: Elites, Counter-elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration*. Penguin Press.

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What if we could find a scientific way to predict the future of humanity? The complexity of human phenomena has always been at the root of the seemingly impassable difference between the social and natural sciences; while the first deals with the unpredictability of human behavior, the second is usually based upon scientific laws that have been rigorously put to the test using the scientific method, which has not been possible regarding human action.

Peter Turchin is a Russian-American biologist who decided to take on the risky mission of trying to identify a method by which human history can be studied as an exact science. For this, he left his original field and began studying economic history and historical dynamics. This epistemological mixture was the origin of a new discipline, of which Turchin is the founder: 'cliodynamics,' the mathematical modeling of historical processes.

Turchin is Editor-in-Chief at *Cliodynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution*, a scientific journal that publishes the studies of scholars interested in developing this brand-new discipline, including, of course, Turchin himself and the team of researchers he leads to deepen the development of his theories.

His first interest when he jumped into the social sciences boat from the ship of biology was demography, which became the foundation for his study of why nations and empires rise and fall – all of this is the main core, to this day, of his studies. His cyclical conception of history can be compared to the work of historians such as Ibn Khaldun and Oswald Spengler, but in *End Times*, Turchin glimpses a slight resemblance between his discipline of cliodynamics and the fictional 'psychohistory' mentioned in the *Foundation* series of sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov.

In the mid-20th century, historical determinism and the predictability of social sciences were major issues for scholars. For instance, Oscar Kaplan (1940) stated that human beings can be predicted by man-made laws. For Kaplan, any science of society associated with good predictability must seek data in the natural sciences as well and encompass different social disciplines that lead to better predictions when understood as tied together. This point of view bears a strong resemblance to Turchin's efforts approximately 80 years later.

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On the other hand, Karl Popper (1957) is one of the major thinkers who refutes the belief that the human future can be predicted because scientific knowledge is unknowable in advance. Turchin responds to Popper in *End Times* by arguing that the most important limitation regarding this claim is understanding the process of knowledge accumulation – hence, the future growth of scientific knowledge is not unknowable but merely unknown, implying that better predictability depends on developments in data collection.

Turchin's first best seller was *Ages of Discord: A Structural-Demographic Analysis of American History* (2016), a work in which the author exposes the fundamentals of cliodynamics and uses this discipline to explain the turbulent events happening in the United States – precisely in a year in which the American audience was trying to understand its own political process marked by the election of Donald Trump as president.

The aim of *End Times* is to introduce cliodynamics (and the main features and conclusions derived from it) to a wide audience, so it is written in a very simple and pedagogical way, including real-life and even fictional examples to clarify every concept Turchin introduces. Even though Turchin tries to position cliodynamics as a universal tool, his main and most recurrent example is, again, the United States, as he recognizes that this is the study case he has worked on most.

In the preface to *End Times*, Turchin specifies that the purpose of the science of history he has introduced is to anticipate how collective choices can lead to (or away from) a better future for people. With this in mind, cliodynamics studies the patterns of human history that conform to the cycles of political integration and disintegration of societies. The basic mechanism that explains the disintegrative phases of nations and empires is founded on the 'wealth pump,' the process by which the elites accumulate wealth at the expense of commoners; this provokes popular immiseration and elite overproduction, the main variables associated with political disintegration.

The book is organized in three parts, containing nine chapters. Part 1 *The Cliodynamics of Power* focuses on introducing in more detail the main variables and features studied in cliodynamics. This contains chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 1, *Elites, Elite Overproduction, and the Road to Crisis*, introduces and explains the main components of social systems and how the relations between them can lead to disintegration processes. First, Turchin defines elites as power holders and argues that there are four types of the latter: those based on force, those on wealth, bureaucratic-administrative, and ideological. Elite overproduction is the phenomenon by which more elite aspirants in society are created than there are positions for them to occupy, so frustrated aspirants may become counter-elites – revolutionary factions that seek to overthrow the established elites to occupy their positions.

On the other hand, elite overproduction is fed by the wealth pump, which provokes popular immiseration that can be detected when real wages stop growing. Immiserated people and frustrated elite aspirants together are an explosive combination that forges 'ages of discord,' times of instability, and a high risk of societal disintegration and collapse. In this sense, Turchin assumes a position that accords with the line of thought of scholars such as Joseph Stiglitz (2012), for whom inequality undermines social cohesion, increases political polarization, hampers economic growth, and affects a society's health, education, and social mobility. This implies a remarkable break from extremely liberal economic perspectives that dismiss inequality as an issue that justifies intervention (especially from the state).

Chapter 2, *Stepping Back: Lessons of History*, deepens understanding of the historical structure of integrative and disintegrative phases that societies pass through. Integrative eras are characterised by internal peace, social stability, and cooperation between elites. On the contrary, in disintegrative times, we observe social instability, the breakdown of intra-elite cooperation, and political violence. While integrative phases can last up to 200 years, disintegrative phases can last up to 100 years. All in all, the full cycle can last between approximately 100 and 300 years and is shorter in polygamous societies given their more abundant biological reproduction. Moreover, waves of instability can hit many societies at the same time because of external or natural forces or the contagion of social phenomena.

After Chapter 2, the author asks whoever is interested to read the annexes before reading parts 2 and 3. In these annexes, Turchin provides an in-depth justification of his goals and relates how the strictly scientific methods he employs to achieve them work, but the most remarkable item in these annexes is the clarification of the epistemological structural-dynamic approach that supports cliodynamics; while the elites and the commoners are parts of the societal structure, societal dynamics include all the different forms of synergy between these parts, meaning that these dynamics can be changed to avoid social catastrophes. Also, Turchin declares that his epistemology is materialistic, meaning that, for cliodynamics, material interests are the most important feature that characterises human behaviour.

Part 2, *The Drivers of Instability*, encompasses chapters 3 to 6 and focuses on explaining the characteristics of every actor in the structure. Chapters 3 to 5 begin introducing fictional characters that represent, in order, an immiserated commoner, a frustrated elite aspirant, and members of the elite. This exercise is helpful for non-scientific readers.

Chapter 3, *The Peasants Are Revolting*, focuses on popular immiseration. It describes how it is harder for American workers today to get a steady job or save money. It also explains that, compared to the period between 1950 and 1980, workers now must work many more hours to reach the same level. Turchin considers as indicators of popular immiseration, besides real wage compression, a lowering of the average height, shorter life expectancy, and higher rates of 'deaths of despair' (suicides and deaths associated with addiction). Turchin considers that since 1980, in the United States, because of Reagan's neoliberal policies, social institutions that nurture social life and cooperation have declined. So, market fundamentalism, while replacing a focus on societal well-being, has provoked a new social contradiction: the educated vs the immiserated.

Turchin's immiserated are theoretically aligned with the figure of the 'precariat' defined by Guy Standing (2011), a concept that refers to a class of people including the unemployed, the underemployed, and the employed in temporary, part-time, or insecure jobs, all of whom lack the stability, decent wages, security, healthcare, pensions, and benefits associated with traditional forms of employment. A key issue for the people considered part of this precariat is their uncertainty about the prospects of maintaining a decent standard of living.

Chapter 4, *The Revolutionary Troops*, focuses on elite overproduction. It argues that between 1950 and 1980, very few people went to college, and those who did were frequently guaranteed a position after graduation. The situation has changed now: there is now a greater supply of youth with advanced degrees than demand for them, so degree holders

become part of the precariat; in fact, Mao, Lenin, Robespierre, Castro, Lincoln, and Gandhi were all part of this social group. Turchin introduces here the ideological element, stating that most sectarian ideologies have an advantage in ages of discord.

Chapter 5, *The Ruling Class*, focuses on American elites. The author introduces the notion that the United States is a plutocracy, a state dominated by economic elites. At the top of American society is a corporate community that includes owners and managers of corporations, banks, and firms. American plutocratic elites have four main characteristics: they want to augment their wealth, they influence society through different mechanisms (from lobbying to media control), they have no center (the phenomenon involves a non-hierarchical network of thousands of individuals), and they maintain rigorous secrecy.

Chapter 6, *Why is America a Plutocracy?* Justifies the author's provocative stance about the United States being a plutocracy. Turchin explains that plutocracies are rare in human history, but in the United States, the northern oligarchs won the Civil War, and having no military rivals on their own continent, they were able to rule the country without the need for a militocracy. The author describes how, in some historical periods, elites work for their own benefit, while in others, they compromise to benefit society. The complexity of plutocracies is that, as they have no hierarchical order, when they work for their own benefit, intra-elite cooperation declines, accelerating societal disintegration.

So, ages of discord can end in only one of two ways: collapse, which may include revolution or civil war, or the elites pulling together, suppressing rivalries, and cooperating. In the American case, the author emphasizes the need to shut down the wealth pump and reverse inequality. Moreover, he declares that to avoid a violent end, economic elites must be persuaded to pursue reforms that go against their own lucrative interests. Turchin states that contemporary American elites tend to promote tax lowering and radical left cultural causes, both having disintegrative consequences.

Part 3, *Crisis and Aftermath*, examines the disintegrative phase currently occurring in America and exposes the author's ideas about how to deal with it. This part is composed of chapters 7 to 9.

Chapter 7, *State Breakdown*, focuses on the process of societal collapse itself. It starts by telling the story of the Roman emperor Nero, who lost his power the day that all the members of his government abandoned him. Using this historical example, Turchin argues that the most frequent cause of state collapse is the implosion of ruling networks. The author suggests that political leaders are usually overrated because, at the end of the day, they would not be able to do anything if not for their supporting networks. Also, people on their own are not able to seize power after a revolution; only organized actors can do that, which is why it is analytically important to consider what the most influential interest groups within a society are, for they represent the expression of counter-elites acting to overthrow the system.

Provocatively, the author says that (even more important than considering whether a political regime is a democracy) what should be observed to anticipate collapse is whether the elites are acting to promote the well-being of the population and what the state of the structure and dynamics of a society is. Turchin adds to this the premise that plutocracies are extremely vulnerable to implosion due to intra-elite competition.

Chapter 8, *Histories of the Near Future*, focuses on the process of societal collapse occurring in the United States nowadays. Considering that ages of discord can only end with downward social mobility executed in violent or non-violent ways, the author states that a

social cataclysm in the 2020s is unavoidable, and the number of members of the elite will be reduced by the end of this decade. As radicalization is still rising, and considering that the State does not seem to be imploding, dissidents are using the Republican Party as a platform for political transformation, occupying the institutions from the inside because the Democratic Party, on the other hand, has become the party of the elite.

The author does not imply that the necessary changes will be good but states that they will inevitably occur if American society does not want to stay trapped in a cycle of internal violence. After a painful decade, moderates should overcome radicals, and a new time of peace should begin – although cliodynamics shows that disintegrative stages tend to have two peaks, so a new age of discord may be expected to happen in the 2070s, approximately. All in all, the author reiterates that the most peaceful way out of the turmoil is to shut down the wealth pump by bringing wage levels up.

Finally, chapter 9, *The Wealth Pump and the Future of Democracy*, focuses on the possibility of a peaceful solution to the 2020's American age of discord. Keeping in mind that the author considers that the last American age of discord was peacefully overcome due to the New Deal, which involved a pact of cooperation between the state, the elites, and the commoners, the current crisis can be overcome if fear makes elites engage in reforms that help avoid societal collapse because they usually risk losing too much after revolutions, even their lives. At the end of the day, there may be no permanent solution because elites tend to be tempted to look after their own benefits at the expense of society, so leaders – who are necessary – need to be constantly reminded to act in ways that benefit everybody. Turchin considers that the cumulative cultural evolution of humanity may help societies seek more civilized solutions to ages of discord.

This book raises very interesting questions about the relationship between political economy and social cohesion. Addressing popular immiseration is something that political decision-makers today must not forget. The author is, without a doubt, proposing an ethos of concord and an Aristotelian equilibrium among the components of society, even regarding wealth, yet without resorting to egalitarian extremism, as he recognizes that elites are necessary.

However, some questions may be raised. First, the aim of identifying an exact science of history may be the origin of an unhealthy tendency to determinism – if one considers that societal dynamics are only mechanical and that the human future is totally predictable and cyclical. Second, the materialist epistemology of cliodynamics may overlook the deep differences between political ideologies, as it considers ideology only a secondary aspect of counter-elite formation.

Third, the solution of raising wages to shut down the wealth pump looks very simple when written down – as if it only depended on the goodwill of the state and elites – but many more economic factors are involved. Fourth, the idea of the elites acting against their own interests needs to be detailed better regarding its limits. Otherwise, it may be used as an excuse for egalitarian extremism. Related to this point, the stability of the Stalin and Lukashenko regimes in their exercise of power is considered by the author as a consequence of their personal modesty and good use of their networks accompanied by general well-being, which is a questionable assumption and might be perceived as the basis for the relativization of actions by those regimes against their citizens. A final question may also be raised about the feasibility of a new kind of 'New Deal' in a globalized world in which nation-states seem to be weaker.

All in all, this book is a very interesting piece. It may be recommended to anyone who wants to learn about a very innovative point of view regarding the political crises of the contemporary world.

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