

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Are We Living Through 'End Times'?

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you.

As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country.

That is why I'm so excited to announce that the Free Press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles.

The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed.

Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry. They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes, and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader.

I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited.

This is going to be an amazing night.

It's a chance to meet other people in the real world who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show.

You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates).

Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates).

I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person.

And now, here's the show.

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

In the 2010s, America seemed like it was on the right track.

Barack Obama had won the presidency two years earlier.

Smartphones and social media promised to connect us all in ways that were impossible to imagine, and gay marriage became the law of the land.

But in 2010, when the president was out speaking about the arc of history bending towards justice and our elites were insisting on the democratic promise of technological change, the historian Peter Turchin was telling a very different story. Perhaps that's because Peter Turchin isn't like most historians.

For starters, he has an unusual background.

He's an evolutionary biologist who's studying lemmings and mice.

And he says that his background in analyzing the complexities of the natural world have allowed him to understand the most complex system there is, the system of human societies.

Turchin has pioneered a field of history, which he calls cleodynamics.

And what it does is apply hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of historical data points, not just in order to understand the present, but to predict future trends.

In 2010, using these tools, Peter and his team published an article making a bold prediction. They said that economic, social, and political instability in the U.S. would hit a peak in or around the year 2020.

Now, at the time, many of his critics said he was crazy to make such a prediction, that it's too hard to predict how history will go, that history isn't a science, it's a humanity, it's an art.

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But then came 2020.

We begin tonight with a nation already on edge in the coronavirus pandemic as protests turned violent across America.

It turned out to be a massively turbulent year.

Tonight, a nation on edge for the first time in 164 years,

the governor of Minnesota is now fully mobilizing the National Guard.

Protests erupting in Minneapolis last night, the powder keg of the crisis,

businesses set on fire as rage continues to boil over for the death of George Floyd while in police

One that would bring about outbreaks of political violence.

It felt like complete chaos between the COVID lockdowns,

the mask and vaccine protests, the BLM riots,

and then only six days into 2021,

the storming of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Hey, brother, we're boots on the ground here.

We're moving on to Capitol now.

So what did Peter Church and see that everyone else missed?

Peter is the author of over 200 articles and eight books.

His fascinating new one is called End Times,

elites, counter elites, and the path of political disintegration.

It argues that societies operate cyclically going through golden ages and end times.

And he says that we're currently looking at the telltale signs of an eminent revolution.

So on today's show, Peter talks to me about how he studies history,

what American history can tell us about our current moment,

why 2024 is going to be a year to watch,

and what individuals can do to shape the direction of where we're going.

Stay with us.

Hi, honestly listeners, I'm here to tell you about an alternative investing platform called

Masterworks. I know investing in finance can be overwhelming, especially given our economic

climate, but there's one thing that will never go in the red, and that is a painting from Picasso's

Blue Period. Masterworks is an exclusive community that invests in blue chip art.

They buy a piece of art and then they file that work with the SEC.

It's almost like filing for an IPO. You buy a share representing an investment in the art.

Then Masterworks holds the piece for three to 10 years, and then when they sell it,

you get a prorated portion of the profit's minus fees.

Masterworks has sold \$45 million worth of art to date from artists like Andy Warhol,

Banksy, and Monet. Over 700,000 investors are using Masterworks to get in on the art market.

So go to masterworks.com slash honestly for priority access.

That's masterworks.com slash honestly. You can also find important Regulation A disclosures at masterworks.com slash cd. Peter Turchin, welcome to honestly.

Okay, so you're an ecologist with a background in applied mathematics,

and yet you've just written a history book called End Times,

elites, counter elites, and the path to disintegration.

How does a person who studies zoology, like studying beetles and butterflies and mice,

come to write about the end of empire? How did your study of animals teach you about

the collapse or the possible collapse of civilization?

Well, in fact, a better description of me is a complexity scientist. I studied complex systems, both using the mathematical models and analysis of large data sets.

And I started, as you said, studying population cycles in animals, beetles, mice, deer, lemmings.

But about 25 years ago, I felt that there was not enough challenge for me within that field.

So I was looking around and at that time history was the only of the disciplines that hasn't been mathematicalized, where people did not systematically translate verbal ideas into models, and where the scientific method hasn't been yet applied in a very systematic way.

And so it started as a hobby, but this hobby very soon took over my life.

And then as I was studying the dynamics of societies, that's when I realized that we may ourselves be living in historical times.

Can you explain very briefly for the person who has never heard of and doesn't know anything about complex systems, a science that's only been around for a few decades, what it is?

Complex systems are essentially those systems that have many moving parts.

And these parts all interact in nonlinear ways, because you cannot just forecast what will a complex system do by extending the trend, the past trend into the future, because complex systems go through changes. They have peaks, they have valleys.

And so essentially, think about our societies that remember that if they go through this good period, so integrative phases, then something changes and they go into a disintegrative phase and times. And then vice versa. This means that the system is behaving in complex ways.

Of course, human societies are even more complex than that, because there are many different influences.

And they have many moving parts, many individuals, but also groups, parties, firms, and things like that. And they're all interacting in very interesting and sophisticated ways, which means that a human

brain is not really capable of understanding how the society as a whole operates. And this is where we need to have the crutches, mathematical models. So that's the first thing. The second thing,

I'm studying both how can we live in large scale societies, complex societies organized as states.

These societies have been around for only 5,000 years, much less than 5% of our evolutionary history. So this is one of the overarching questions that I'm interested in. But secondly,

as we started to amass data on the functioning of past societies, we realized that societies can function well for a while, maybe a hundred years, sometimes less, sometimes more. But inevitably, something starts to happen. Things start to break down and they enter what we might call end times. So why? So that is the big question that drives my and my colleagues' research.

Okay, so that's complex systems. But there's another important term that comes up in your book that we need to define before we dive deeper into the conversation. And that's

CleoDynamics, this term you coined about 20 years ago. What is CleoDynamics?

It's a Portemonnais word which is constructed by putting together Cleo, who was the muse of history for Greeks. And Dynamics is a study of change. Actually, history is also about why things change with time. So Dynamics gives us a more formal, more elaborate way to study history using mathematical

and analytical tools. So CleoDynamics is essentially history as science.

Let's talk about how this theory of understanding history put you on my and probably other people's

radar. And that's that in 2010, you kind of predict the chaos of 2020. You wrote this, very long secular cycles interact with shorter term processes. In the United States, 50-year instability spikes occurred around 1870, 1920, and 1970. So another could be due around 2020. Now, a listener doesn't need a reminder of the events of that turbulent year, but it was indeed an instability spike. You had COVID, you had the BLM protests and riots, you had a contested election. So how did you see that coming? Well, by that point, around 2008 or so, I've been studying past societies. And as I mentioned, we found that they always get into these end times, which happened to recur periodically, not with a perfectly mathematical periodicity, but there was something that drove those societies into social turbulence, political disintegration, and things like that. And by that point, I was staying away from the present, because I didn't want to get into the politics, you know, I didn't want to be criticized by different party supporters, because whenever science comes out and says something, it's going to displease either one of the partners or both. But I get a little bit tired because people kept asking me, I was giving talks about the 17th century crisis, the age of revolutions, things like that, and they were asking me, well, where are we? And so I decided to look at where we are. And this is not a very simple process, because the theory is based on quite massive amounts of data. So it took me a couple of years to gather together the database from which I could actually perceive the trends. And what I found truthfully shocked me, because I saw our society well on the road to crisis. Of course, our society is quite different from ancient Rome, or medieval France, and even pre-Civil War United States. But at a more abstract level, and we'll talk about the drivers of instability in a minute, well, at that level, the drivers of instability were already working full throttle. And so that was one of the reasons why I decided to publish this forecast. And I just want to emphasize that I'm not a prophet. This was a scientific prediction. Remember, we want to determine which theories are better than others. And to do that, we want to extract predictions from them. Of course, predicting the future is one of the hardest things to do. And so that was the spirit in which I published this forecast. Right. And you said that 50-year instability spikes occurred around 1870, 1920, and 1970, so another could be due around 2020. What was the reaction when you predicted that? So there are two rhythms. One of them is about a couple hundred years. And on top of that, we have these 50-year cycles. All right. So if you look at the American history, yes, you just mentioned those 50-year spikes, but they were overlaid over a long period of, I call it age of discord one, which started around 1850s and lasted into 1920. And during this period, we had two particular peaks of outbreaks of political violence and things like that. All right. So what was the reaction? There was frankly disbelief. And it was tinged with a desire to think that I must be wrong, because when, you know, it's just a problem of nobody wants to believe bad predictions. So people like Steve Pinker, for example, or Max Rosen, they were making all those rosy predictions right around that time, 2010. And of course, they were very popular, because everybody wants to know that there is going to be a happy ending to this story. But the reaction was negative. But it was fine, because I had tenure at that point. This is one big advantage of American academics is that once you have tenure, you can actually try dangerous, risky, intellectual strategies. And so I was willing to wait and see. I was not expecting exactly what would happen in the future. Remember, it's a prediction. So when the prediction goes wrong, you want to also learn how we can make our theories better. But it was really quite remarkable. It was like, you know, in that Indiana Jones movie, there is a huge ball rolling down

to you and it's rolling. There's nowhere to go but smash you. So as I was giving talks during that tenure period, I would update my data sets. And I would say, we are still on track to a crisis. And things to me became very clear in 2016, actually, during that presidential election. Peter, a lot of people I know, myself included, have this sneaking feeling, like a visceral feeling that things are unstable right now. And I often try and tell myself that that's just an emotional response. I'm just looking at the internet too much. But you say it's not irrational. You say it's a rational reaction to what's unfolding. You write very clearly that we're in a crisis. You don't call it a crisis. You call it a disintegrative phase. And you argue that it's the first such phase the U.S. has experienced like this since the Civil War in the Gilded Age. And that's pretty dire comparison as far as I'm concerned because 600,000 people died in the Civil War. Women couldn't vote back then. People suffered horrible deaths from things like cholera and scarlet fever. So isn't it a bit hyperbolic to compare our moment to that one? Yes. That's why you cannot really rely on subjective feelings because if you look through literature, for example, there are people complaining about their societies all the time. Right? So how do you get around that? This is where you need data. You need quantitative data. So let me give you one example. Until late 1970s, for about 40 or 50 years, the wages of American workers have been growing up together with GDP per capita. And then productivity kept going up and the wages have stagnated and even declined in several periods. So this is data that has been available. What does it mean? The first obvious thing is that people's well-being was declining. And we see this by 2010s. We have seen this taking the form of the death of despair, the increased rates of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse and things like that. So in addition to the subjective feelings, and here sociologists, people and the higher proportion would say that society is going in the wrong direction. So it's not just one individual. It's a mass feeling. But in addition to that, we see both at the economic, at the social level, we see immiseration taking hold. So this is a real thing. But there are two more consequences. This is the obvious one. Actually, I call it the wealth pump in the book. So if productivity keeps growing but they are not getting compensated for it, where does all that extra wealth go? Well, this is the reverse wealth pump that the creatures from the poor and gives them to the rich. So the first negative consequence is that population well-being has been declining. That means that there has been a lot of discontent and that discontent creates energy that could be channeled by political entrepreneurs. We can talk about that a little later. But the second part is that what is happening is we started overproducing wealthy people. And it is a remarkable statistic. In the 40 years since early 1980s, the numbers of uber-rich, like people who own 10 million dollars or more, it exploded 10-fold. The population grew 40%, but the number of decamillionaires grew 10-fold. This is amazing. Until I saw this data, I couldn't understand that this was happening. Now, why this is bad? On the surface of it, okay, people getting rich, that's the American dream. You would think that there is no downside, but there is a downside because wealth in the United States is closely connected with politics. First of all, many of the wealthy people run themselves as candidates or they support candidates. So we have overproduced the number of wealthy people. Not all of them will become Trump or Michael Bloomberg and so on and so forth. But the more uber-rich you have, the more of these elite ONABs for political positions you will have. We call them elite aspirants. So you write in your book that there's a handful of factors that are the harbingers of end times or societal crisis. And you've mentioned a few of them, but I want to go through them one by one. Here's what they are. Popular immiseration, elite overproduction,

failing fiscal health, weakened legitimacy of the state, and outside geopolitical factors may be like a war. So let's take each of those in turn. I want to start with popular immiseration. How do you see it and how do you measure it? Well, let me step back and say that measuring economic well-being is difficult because real wages is very sensitive to how you measure inflation. And that's why I and other people, there is a whole field, it's called anthropometrics, that in fact measures the biological well-being. One of those things is life expectancy. It was a shock to me in 2017 to see that the United States' life expectancy has declined. This is unprecedented. But the other interesting indicator is the average height. Now, the individual height is determined mostly by genetic factors. But if you're looking at a population which has the same genetic composition over time, then average height is a very sensitive indicator of well-being. At the beginning of the 19th century, Americans were the tallest nation in the world. But they lost about three inches of height during the 19th century. So that was a very clear indicator that something wrong was happening. This is your immiseration, really. So the immiseration is that we're getting shorter. Yes. Why are we getting shorter? Surely it's not because we're like male nourished. Well, because the height of an individual is determined in two growth spurts, the first five years and then the teenage spurts. So the economic conditions that you experience when you are especially a teenager, that's what will result in you getting to a particular height. And so this is not just nutrition, right? But it's also how much disease you encounter because your body has to fight it off, how much you work. Of course, nowadays, children don't work in the United States. But back in the 19th century, they did. So let's give you a very recent example. In France, the number of people who don't have enough to eat have been increasing over the past two or three years because of the food price inflation. There's some quite remarkable data that shows that this is happening. So it can happen even in our democratic and capitalist societies. So that's one of the objective ways we can measure immiseration. And of course, you always try to gather many different angles. And only if they all agree, then you can be certain that you are capturing something important underlying them. Okay, the second thing that you talk about is something you mentioned earlier, which is elite overproduction. What is that? What does that mean?

Elite overproduction turns out to be the best predictor of a crisis to come. It is essentially ubiquitous in the pre-crisis periods of all the societies. And at this point, we have nearly 200 humans as past societies in our database. So this is a pretty strong statistical statement. Here, I use the game of musical chairs to illustrate it. But except in the usual game, you start with 11 players and 10 chairs, right? And one person loses. But instead of removing chairs, we keep chairs constant. Instead, we add more players. You can imagine the amount of chaos that is going to happen. Now, let's connect this to the overproduction of wealthy people in the United

States. As more and more of them became players in politics, first of all, that drove up the price of getting into office. But more importantly, the more people are vying for these positions, the more people are going to be frustrated. They're going to be losers. And humans are not agents in some kind of mathematical games because humans don't have to follow rules. This is why the dark side of competition is that if it's too extreme, that creates conditions for people starting to break rules. This is why 2016 to me was such a revelation, because at that point, we had in spring 2016, we had 17 major candidates, Republican candidates in the presidential primaries,

Republican primaries. This was the highest number ever at that point. And so what was happening, because there was such intense competition, there was a lot of incentive for some people to start breaking rules. And we saw that one individual in particular was very good at breaking rules and was getting ahead. And others started to imitate him. Matt Taibbi has written a great book about that election. And he was just scathing about how the candidates, the presidential candidates, were just breaking rules left and right, just trying to get ahead.

But let's stick on, if we could, just for a second, this analogy of musical chairs. Because I hear that analogy, and I think, hold on, Peter, isn't this entirely antithetical to basic market economic principles, which is there aren't a fixed number of chairs. And the whole idea of free market democracies like ours is that if there aren't enough chairs to sit on, you go and make yourself a chair. So I want to push back on the idea that the number of chairs is a static number. And I want you to convince me that I'm wrong to be skeptical.

Well, no, that works in economics to a certain extent. But in politics, there is only one president, there is only 100 senators, 435 representatives. And again, in our society, we think competition is good. But competition is nonlinear thing. Too much of it is bad.

I see how you're right. If you look at the realm of politics where there's two senators per state, or you look at academia, there's only a certain number of chairs in the economics department at Harvard or University of Chicago. But what about the realms of technology, business? It seems to me that there's an increasing number of chairs in those places. But still, even in other fields, just think about how many columnists at New York Times and things like that are possible. Of course,

what you and Matt have done, you have created your own chairs. And this is great. But why is politics important? Politics is important because without well-working democratic principles running our societies, our societies become dysfunctional. And it can lead to political disintegration.

So to me, politics is extremely important and it plays a central role in the theory.

In the theory of elite over production. That's correct.

Okay. So you make the argument that every year not only is the number of people who want the fixed number of chairs going to go up, but the cost of the ticket you write will get higher. So for example, college degree is no longer enough. Now you have to go to an elite college. Not only do you have to go to an elite college, you have to also be a varsity athlete or whatever it is.

Oh, you have to get master's and PhD or advanced degree.

Exactly. But our societal structure is very different than medieval France or Confucian China. There's no limit on progress or economic output. So why is there an upper limit on how many people control the levers of our society? Well, that's an existential question. So human groups to cooperate, they have to be certain size about 150, between 100 and 200 individuals.

So the group at the top where people all know each other and they all can understand what's moving or other people, it is by nature limited. So as our society became 300 million, there is still going to be a smallest group at the top. Okay. So I want to just stick on this question of elite over production for one more beat. With the recent Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action and basically our widespread societal obsession with elitism and how to become an elite. I wanted to highlight a passage from your book that I found really compelling. It's about the flaws of the meritocracy, which I generally think of as a good thing. You write that elite over production corrodes the rules of the game, the social norms and institutions that govern how society works in a functional way. It destroys cooperation. It brings out the dark side of

meritocracy. It creates a few winners and masses of losers. And I guess I wanted to ask, is there a better alternative? In other words, the meritocracy, in theory at least, allows for the hardest working, most talented people to win. And when I think about alternatives, like an aristocracy,

let's say, this seems exponentially better. So isn't it sort of a little bit like democracy, the very best of a lot of bad options? Actually, I think you're right.

Some meritocracy is necessary. I agree with you. But I'm just saying that you cannot make this statement because there are other things that were tried and they maybe worked not so much worse than democracy. Also, we tend to denigrate aristocratic societies. But many aristocratic societies have functioned quite well also in the past. So would you agree with the Buckley line that you'd rather be governed by the first 500 names in the Boston phone book than the faculty of Harvard? No, I'm not saying that I think he is completely wrong. But I don't see what is the evidential basis. Why should we conclude that? I'm a professor myself. I don't want the United States to be governed by professors to tell the truth, and especially Harvard professors.

But Peter, for you, the jury's out on whether or not a meritocracy is better than an aristocracy. That's how bad you think the current meritocracy is. My point to which I want to circle again is that too much meritocracy works on competition. My point is a very important point that too much competition is destructive because it is not meritocracy anymore. If there are too many people competing for each spot, then there is temptation to start breaking rules, which immediately starts happening. And so people who are better at breaking rules are the ones who get ahead of the game. So I'll give you an example. Do you think Donald Trump is really the best individual to lead the United States? No, Peter, I do not. Well, but he got into the office as a result of two things. First of all, because there was too much competition amongst the candidates. And secondly, he channeled the mass discontent resulting from the popular immiseration.

The second point I agree with, the first I absolutely do not. I don't think the reason that Donald Trump won is because there were 17 people in the primary. I think he was tapping into something very, very deep in the zeitgeist of American life right now. We're going to get to Trump in a little bit. Let's continue to go through these sort of five harbingers.

Okay, before we do that, I want to talk more about a little production. So remember, we talked about the negative effects of the wealth pump. First of all, popular immiseration, secondly, on the reduction of wealthy people. The third one is even more subtle because the mass of the population, their well-being is declining. We have the conditions of precarity, knowledge precarity when people leave hand to mouth and people naturally want to escape that. So as the immiseration happens, the more bright and energetic and ambitious members of that class,

they want to escape from it. How do you do that in the United States? You go to college and then maybe get an advanced degree such as a law degree or an MD and things like that. So what's been happening is that we've been overproducing people who want to escape precarity also. And as a result

of that, we have too many PhDs for the professor positions. But what's worse, we have too many youth with law degrees for the positions that we have for the many society. We overproduce law degrees by a factor of three to one at this point. Now, this is dangerous because if you think about the famous revolutionaries, most of them were lawyers. Lenin was a lawyer, Castro, Robespierre,

Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer. So these are people who are energetic, well-connected, ambitious, and then suddenly huge swaths of them are denied positions for which they trained and perhaps got into huge debt. And then they become revolutionaries. That's not all of them. But the more of them you have, the more revolution they become. And it's not just because they are out to get better material things for themselves. The system clearly is unjust. So this feeling of in social injustice is also a very important driver, driving revolutionaries and other radicals who want to overthrow the existing regime. We're going to get to revolution. I want to just continue to lay out the signs of end times. So talk to me about the economy and our stagnation.

What are some of the metrics that you look at right now that makes you think we're in a very, very bad place economically, which is a huge contributor to this disintegrative phase? Well, we're not actually in a terribly bad way economically speaking, because if you think about it, the economy has been growing. I mean, yes, there are recessions and things like that. We are growing, growing as fast as we can be because of the immiseration results in the majority of people having less money to buy things. And that's what drives the economy. So people like Robert Reich, for example, have been tirelessly pointing this out. But that is not really a driving force as far as I'm concerned in the theory that we work on, because the other factors, illiterate production and immiseration, they are the ones that are the actual drivers. You can connect them to why individuals feel disgruntled and discontented with the state of things and why they want to revolt and change things. But the third one that I mentioned in the book is the fiscal health of the state. So during these good periods, the integrative periods, the population is doing well. So you can tax them without decreasing their well-being too much. The elites are few and not so wealthy, all right? And they don't really impede the state from collecting taxes. But once you get immiseration, people don't want to pay taxes even more than usual. And then with illiterate production, what happens? Their competition between elites drives was known as conspicuous consumption. So the elites typically get very selfish at that point. And they essentially shut down the revenue to the states. And we saw this in the United States. Back in 1960, over 90% of the tap income went out as federal taxes. And then it has been dismantled.

So now it's 20-something. And in fact, many wealthy people escape from paying taxes even at that rate. And this has not just happened in the United States. This happened in the pre-revolutionary France during the Ancien Régime France. The aristocracy starved the state from revenue. And that was what was the trigger that led into the revolution. And that can give you many other historical examples of that. You say that the U.S. is a plutocracy, a society run by the wealthy. Is that right? Yes. So actually, maybe let me step back because we're talking about elites, but who are the elites? Let me just explain that a bit more. Elites are simply a small proportion of the population who concentrate power in their hands. And social power comes in four basic flavors.

It's coercive or military. It's economic. It's political or administrative. And it's ideological. So the different sectors of elites, they focus on different types of power in western societies. It's the coalition between economic elites and political elites. But the United States is unusual even for the rest of the OECD countries in the dominance of economic elites. Essentially, that's why I call us a plutocracy is because we are governed by wealth.

Okay. So we have political immiseration, the overproduction of elites. We have the fact that the top 1% of our elites, our economic elites hold more wealth than the entire middle class.

Another factor you talk about is the weakened legitimacy of the state, right? The lack of trust in government. Tell me about how you see that. Well, as people who see that their life is getting worse because of immiseration, how do people decide whether they're doing well or poorly? No, Americans don't compare themselves to people living in Chad, for example, right? They don't know about Chad. No, we look at Jeff Bezos on his yacht. Right. We do some of that. But also, you grow up in the household of your parents and you intimately know how it operates. I mean, if your level of well-being cannot even match that, then you feel discontented. There's one Greek student in Athens during the demonstrations. He cried, it is not right that children should live worse than their parents. And that's what happened after the New Deal for two or three generations, every generation in America and in Western Europe was getting better. And then this ended in the 1980s, especially 1990s. And so that is the very important driver eroding the legitimacy of our system. Okay. So we have political immiseration. We have elite overproduction. We have financial stagnation. We have lack of trust in the state. And then the last harbinger of possible decline, which you call outside geopolitical forces. And I wonder what you think of right now when you say outside geopolitical forces. Do you think about the war in Ukraine? Do you think about the rise of China? And how are those things impacting us here at home? Well, first of all, I want to say that large empires like United States or Imperial China, they are so big that they're reasonably insulated from those external forces. So we need to think about middle-sized countries, like Egypt, for example. So in Egypt, the specific trigger for the evolution, there were two. First of all, there was a geo-economic thing. The food prices had increased in the immiseration of people. It created energy. Secondly, it was a geo-cultural thing because it was part of the Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia and then spread to the rest of the Arab world. So those are influences. To tell the truth, in this theory that I explain, I don't talk much about them because they are sort of secondary in many ways.

Why is it inevitable that a society will have elites at all?

This is a very important question. And in fact, there are other species like ants that have no elites because they have a way to coordinate their activities and to cooperate in large numbers without leaders. So they don't have a queen ant like bees have a queen bee? The queen is not a queen

in the human sense. She's not a ruler. She just produces eggs like crazy. She does not govern in any sense. No, it's all done. It's a remarkable system. This is the dream of anarchists.

Unfortunately, for human societies, an artistic dream is a pipe dream because humans cooperate in different ways. We have to have interpersonal connections. We connect by cooperating with people we know. And so our whole society, 300 million people living in the United States, we are connected through multiple networks. But at each step, you have to create an organization which will then branches out and then you unify the whole 1,000 people and there is going to be levels in that hierarchy. So this part is inevitable that we have to have power hierarchies because obviously people in the center of those networks, they have more power than people who are at the periphery. Now, the trick that our societies have been struggling with over the last 5,000 years is how to evolve ways to have leaders, but make them act in pro-social way. So to make them act for the benefit of the whole group or the whole society. All right. And we have not yet completely resolved the system, which is why we are in fact today in such a predicament.

But there is hope because we have good data showing that as the amount of institutions,

such as democratic institutions, for example, and many other things, as they evolved, they actually make our societies more cooperative and less liable to collapse. So we are gradually evolving those institutions, but we are halfway there. Why are our elites just so bad right now? Like when I think about leaders or role models in American life, I can hardly name five people. Why is that? Well, it's known as the iron law of oligarchy. So essentially, as you give power to people, just to administrative power, power to organize things, there is an inevitable temptation to convert that power into better things for themselves. And so this is where democratic institutions actually work, even though they are not perfect. They help us to constrain elites to act in the public way that benefits the majority of people. But the real question is why do elites sometimes act in those ways? We'll be right back after a quick break. I want to talk about skepticism of your theory, but also of the science of history more generally, and if there can actually be a science of history. In the appendix to your book, you detail the databases that you rely on, and they're impressive. We're talking about a complete repository of 300 cases of societal collapse, thousands if not millions of data points. But the idea of scienceifying history is a pretty controversial idea. A lot of historians think of history not as a science that can be understood with mathematical equations, but rather an art, because there's too many variables to put history into any kind of scientific framework. And I think part of the reason that people are skeptical about scienceifying history is because other sciences of history have been horribly discredited. You grew up in the Soviet Union, or were born there, where another science of history, Marxism, was celebrated and obviously failed. So what makes your science of history different from other sciences of history? First of all, I agree with you. History is not a science. It's a humanity. It is a highly technical discipline. Practicing historians are incredibly knowledgeable people and have to train very rigorously to get there. And so I'm quite content to live history as it is, because what they are doing in the process, they are generating lots of data. Clear dynamics is different. Clear dynamics wants to test theories with data. Historians don't really care about that. Of course, they do in a sense. You know, you read a book about the collapse of Roman Empire, and the historian will have their own pet theories about why that happened. And one German historian collected all those ideas. There's more than 200 specific explanations about why Roman Empire collapsed. Now that, to me, as a scientist, to me, that's an unsatisfactory state of things. So there are many different theories of evolution in evolutionary biology. In terms of one of them, actually it was better than others. So we should do this. I argue that we should do the same for history. Why? Because we live in our complex societies, and we want to be able to help them to function well. I mean, we spend a huge amount of money on health research and on research into environmental sciences. We should spend equal amount of money to figure out how to make our societies much healthier. And that means how do you do that by throwing the good old scientific method at it? And that means that we have to find out which explanations work better than others. So to be very crude about it, your idea is that history moves in cycles, and that we're like a snowball a little bit rolling down a hill right now, headed off a cliff. How do you respond to the Stephen Pinkers of the world, who in my view have a more linear idea of history, that, you know, the arc of history is long, but it bends toward progress kind of view. And they point to data too. They say, look at all of these economic metrics. Standards of living

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Are We Living Through 'End Times'?

are at an all time high. We're not in poverty. We don't die from like a snake bite on the Oregon Trail or whatever example you want to use. How do you respond to that view of things?

Well, I actually don't argue against it. Both are happening. I was just talking about how human societies have accumulated governance institutions over the past 5000 years.

So both processes happen. There is an undeniable progress. Our economies are much more productive

than 100 years ago, 200 years ago. So that is undeniable. And we can show that with data.

However, on top of that, it doesn't mean that just because over the past 5000 years, things have been getting better, they're going to get better in the next 10 years.

These are not precise mathematical cycles. These are most more like booms and busts really.

Okay. And so on that progress trend or around it, there are booms and busts. And unfortunately, we are right now in the bust situation. So shouldn't we learn how we can smooth out those busts?

Because in the majority of cases, these end times end up in revolutions or civil wars that kill hundreds or sometimes tens of millions of people like happened in China in the 19th century.

So don't we want to somehow find out how we avoid those terrible outcomes?

Yes, I would like to find out how to avoid it because frankly, when I'm reading your book and I'm encountering your ideas and I'm listening to you talk, the core idea here that history is in inevitable cycle, it depresses me. And I find myself like wanting to rage against that idea because the message I think it conveys is that these cycles are inevitable. And in a way, we're just victim to the moment and the time that we live in and there's not much we can do about it because according to your scientific theory of history, we go up and we go down and we are in the down right now. But that's not my message at all. I'm an optimist by nature. And so let me put it this very simply. By understanding why these end times happen, we can socially engineer ourselves out of them. Social engineering is a phrase that really scares me based on history.

What do you mean by that? I mean by that. We know, for example, that okay, let's go back to the late 1970s when the wealth pump started operating. What if we had a very good theory of how our society's work and you could say, stop doing that down the road, it's going to cause a disaster. And some people saw that, in fact, there are people who saw that right there at the moment and they started pointing it out. And there is a number of thinkers over the past 40 years that have been pointing this out. And because the current situation is to the advantage of the elites, especially the economic elites, they suppressed essentially those voices and that's why we're rising our way to the precipice, hopefully not. I don't know, Peter, but I want to push back because I think that there's something very disempowering, maybe even dehumanizing about the idea you're putting out here. You write in the last pages of your book, I'm paraphrasing, the individual mind is unknowable, but the group mind is knowable. Individuals don't matter. Civilizations will collapse and that we can accelerate the collapse a bit or slow it down a bit if we act correctly. If that's the best we can do, the kind of like 10% at the margins, how is that not a fatalist bleak view of history and of the individual's ability to change it?

First of all, I don't say individuals don't matter. Most of the time in a single act of human will, free will, is not going to change the course of history.

How can you say Churchill didn't change the trajectory of the West? If Churchill had not lived like I don't know how the world would have wound up, that's my view because I guess I believe in this old school idea of the great man theory of history. Remember, it was not a UK that won

World War II. It was USSR and USA. If Churchill died of heart attack, I'm pretty sure the war would end in the same way. But let's talk about some better examples. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, all right, would we agree that he was extremely influential individual? Yes, Lincoln. Lincoln started a civil war, so that's not probably the best example, but Franklin Delano Roosevelt... and saved the Republic. But yes, go on. But FDR avoided civil war. United States, according to our data, was in a revolutionary situation around 1920. But hold on. Sorry, just to go back to Lincoln for a second. Doesn't Lincoln actually prove your point that great men can shape history? Choose Hitler. Choose Lincoln. Choose whoever. The point is that those were singular individuals that, in my view, created cycles as opposed to just being victim to the cycle that was inevitably happening. That's what I'm trying to understand. When a person or a group of people changed the cycle, or are they just victim to it? Yes, that's what we see. How do we know this? Because we studied, right now, we have 170 cases of crisis, all right? And most of them, it ends in civil war, revolution, and so on and so forth. But in 10 to 15% cases, they managed to avoid bloodshed. That means that, apart that there were some influential individuals, or rather influential groups, that understood the problem, even if intuitively, and understood how to take steps. So it's not just the New Deal, the Chartist period, which is the middle of the 19th century in the UK. And there are many other examples that show that taking appropriate action by good people with a good leader can actually change things and avoid civil war. So, see, I'm not arguing with you, but on this point, I'm arguing with you on the other point that it is influential individuals that create cycles. There, I disagree with you. That is a result of millions of human views getting summed. And that's how those trends develop. In other words, Hitler or FDR or Lincoln summons the will of massive numbers of people. And that's the real change maker. I mean, after all, FDR had to be elected, right? So he persuaded the majority of population, the huge majority to vote for him, especially in second and third elections. So he was actually summoning the will of common people. And by each person voting for FDR was actually voting for a better future of America. They didn't know it, but this is what they created the Golden Age, the 30 glorious years after the war. So both individuals matter and those impersonal social forces. In my model, we have to include both of them. However, individuals matter only at certain points where the system is amenable to small push can result in large effects. Okay, well, let's talk about that push, right? If those of us who love this country and don't want us to be in a doomed spiral want to know from you, how do we change our trajectory when we have an elite that many people view as corrupt and unrepresentative? And here's what you say. You say that one of two groups is going to lead the charge against this current elite establishment, either emissarated noncredentialed working class, which is a jargony way of saying like carpenters or truck drivers, or frustrated aspirants within the credentialed class, which in English is like young people with great SAT scores that are denied admissions maybe to elite universities. And you say that this first group, the carpenters, the plumbers are going to fail because there's a lack of effective organization among them. But the latter group, these frustrated excess elites are going to be the ones to lead the charge for change. Do I have that right? And tell me how that will work. Yes, you're quite right. And that's because we have on the large historical material, you see that if elites are unified and the state is strong, then popular uprisings are always fail. Just think about the jacquerie in France or, you know, there are many other such uprisings, and they were all killed and dispersed.

So returning back to why do we need the elites? Because any kind of action, especially good action that results in good outcomes, is a result of organized action by many people co-hearing in social movements, parties, or some organizations that have set goals.

Then they work in a very disciplined manner to achieve those goals, persuade the rest of the society to follow the lead. That is how positive change occurs in human societies.

Okay, the subtitle of your book contains the word counter-elites. Explain the difference to me between the elites and the counter-elites and how people should know which one they're dealing with.

That's very simple, because there are always more elite wannabes than elite positions.

So some of those elite wannabes are frustrated and getting a position, so these are frustrated elites, right? And some of those just accept the situation, go back to carpentine or whatever, but the other proportion of them are driven by the sense of injustice. They decide to take their alternative ways. You are, by the way, you and Martin... I'm a counter-elite. You are a counter-elite because the established elites are sitting in MSNBC and the New York Times columnists. And by the way, this may not please you, but Tucker Carlson is also a counter-elite, although he is on the other side of the spectrum. So just to name a few other counter-elites so people get a sense, you would consider Matt Taibbi, who left Rolling Stone a counter-elite, Andrew Sullivan, who left New York Magazine a counter-elite. But are there counter-elites that are inside the establishment institutions? Let me give you an example. Would JD Vance, who ran on a very populist platform to become Senator in Ohio,

would he be considered a counter-elite inside the Senate? Is it possible to be inside an established organization and be a counter-elite? Is RFK considered a counter-elite? Help round out for me the picture of these specific people a little bit more. Yeah, so some counter-elites become revolutionaries and they want to violently overthrow the regime. Other individuals become dissident elites, right? And so they want to work within the system to try to change it.

So I see JD Vance at this point, but also Bernie Sanders, if we look at the left part of the spectrum, they are trying to work within the system to reform it. So they're dissident elites?

Yes, dissident elites would be better because counter-elites are usually violent. They propose some kind of violent solutions. Okay, so to be clear, I'm a non-violent counter-elite.

I do not think I have the revolutionary spirit. Right, okay, you're a dissident in it then.

Well, I don't know. I don't know. I guess I'm confused a little bit. So we have disaffected elites, counter-elites, dissident elites. It all gets a little bit confusing.

I understand. Right. But human societies are complex and so I would not be giving justice by trying to boil things down to just one or two major points.

One of the things I find convincing about your argument is that you basically say that the challenge to the current corrupt elite is not going to come from the left. It's going to come from the right. And why is that? It's because that is the location of the most prominent counter-elites and also because the right is attracting frustrated aspirational elites. So for example, we're watching in real time how Asian Americans are moving from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party for many of the reasons that we've sort of touched on. And you boldly write that today the Republicans are making a transition to becoming a true revolutionary party. You add the right-wing populists intend to use the GOP as an already existing organization to grasp power and added advantage is that control of one of the main parties offers them a nonviolent legal

route to power. Talk to me about how you see that playing out over the past few years and how someone like Trump fits into that story. Yes. Keep in mind that in different countries and at different time periods, the situation was different. So back in the revolutions of the Russian revolution and so on, we had the left-wing counter-elites who led the revolution. But you're completely right. The major difference now in the United States is that the Democratic Party, which had been the party of working people, has become the party of the 10%. And establishment Republicans used to be the party of 1% and still maybe the majority of Republicans are those. But the new rising populist movement within the Republican Party invites it to be more successful than people on the left like Bernie Sanders and so on. Because they are channeling the popular discontent, not just Asian Americans. The quintessential Democratic contingent, the Latinos, they are switching in droves to the Republican Party. So that is a telltale sign for me. How does Tucker Carlson fit into this story? So he is a very good example of a dissident elite. He is not proposing violence, but he has been criticizing the ruling class. In fact, New York Times has counted how many times he called the governing elites in the United States the ruling class. It's his saying. And he has been criticizing it from the establishment. Now that Fox News is, of course, part of the establishment of the ideological elites in the United States. And now when I wrote the book, he was still working and actually speaking a little bit why he hasn't been fired. Of course, as soon as I turned the book in, he was fired from Fox. And now he is his own independent platform. But he is wealthy. That's what many, many people don't

understand. That in order to become a revolutionary, you don't have to be poor. In fact, it helps to have wealth. Lenin, he was a noble. He actually owned land and peasants were paying rent to him. And that helped him to support the revolution. I talk about one of the wealthiest people in Russia at the time, gave tons of money to Bolsheviks. So Tucker Carlson, just because he is a wealthy person, it doesn't mean that he disqualifies himself from being a dissident elite.

Peter, why would anyone choose to be a counter elite when all of the incentives are there to at least aspire to become part of the normal elite? Like what lies on the side of counter elite is social suicide, career suicide, getting tagged as all kinds of bad words. So what will incentivize elite aspirants to sort of flip and join the counter elite side?

I'll give you two reasons. First of all, being a counter elite is a high risk by high potential gain strategy. As somebody said, success of revolution is a 10,000 new jobs for revolutionaries. All right? So if you're beating your head against the wall and you see millions of other people who cannot get into positions, you know your chances of trying to get into established elites are zero, then even a small chance of success of revolution may be worth it. That's one reason. But this is very cross and materialistic and people are much more complicated beings than just, you know, homo-economy key. The second driving reason is that in these end times, it is palpable, the sense of injustice is palpable. It is not right that the majority of population is losing ground and all the riches go to, in many of the wealthy, they also don't think it's right. So young individuals coming from very elite backgrounds, they could be motivated by trying to change the system for the better because many humans, they want to do good. And so changing the

system for the better is to do good. Of course, many of those individuals, they start by trying to do good, but then because they don't get anywhere, they turn to violent. I've read a number of accounts

of the weatherman movement. These people, they came from elite backgrounds and they were motivated by trying to change the world for the better. But what they ended up doing was starting to blow up bombs. So this is a slippery road where you can travel all the way to become violent, revolutionary, violent, radical. I want to push back just one question on this idea that counter elites are essential for the revolution because there's a way of looking at Donald Trump's win in 2016 and saying Trump was able to win the presidency and form a new Republican coalition, not by pulling on counter elites, but pulling on these non-credential, non-elites, right? So explain to me how Trump's 2016 win proves your point that you need counter elites for the revolution or do you not see Trump's win as revolutionary?

I don't see it as revolutionary, but Trump is a counter-meet himself. He is one of that wealthy class that wanted to translate his wealth into politics, but why he won is the second thing, immiseration. That's why the Weatherman movement had no traction because back in the 1960s, in early 70s, their wages were... Things were getting better. Things were getting better. People felt better. They could not understand why those college students are rebelling or whatever. They thought they were foolish and so on. But now we have huge swaths of the population who can be demobilized and they were mobilized. Many people who voted for Trump in 2016, I know such, they said, at least he is saying what we feel needs to be said. He's going to strike against the elites they established in his statement. And so that's why they voted for him. So Trump is the ultimate counter-elite. Do you see the potential for a counter-elite on the left, like RFK Jr., or do you think that that's not possible on the left right now?

Yeah, it's possible. It was possible, especially possible maybe 10 years ago, when the Democratic Party has not lost the support from the majority of American populations. And maybe it can be turned around. So most of the revolutions in history were made by left-leaning countries, right-leaning countries, elites. America is somewhat unusual in this respect.

So Trump was an expression of people's rage, right? He capitalized on this immiseration. I guess I wonder how you understand the red wave that wasn't in the recent midterm elections last year. Was that a push by American voters to say, we don't want to go so far down this road? Was that

our collective hive mind attempt to sort of nudge things in a good direction and return to some degree of normalcy? Or is that an insignificant data point, as far as you're concerned?

Well, remember that this theory works over not just days. And also, we can't predict who's going to be in 2024 and so on and so forth. So my major point is that there are fluctuations on this.

The wealth gap is still operating. The immiseration is increasing. So we are still on that route to more and more crisis. But on the route to the more and more crisis, people get tired of constantly going to demonstrations. That's how the Yellow West movement was defeated. They showed remarkable stamina. But after many months, they just got tired of going on revolutions and not doing anything. And so that's why you have a temporary reduction of the intensity of things. But as the fundamental factors continue to work, their mischief, it will generate more and more instability down the road. That's what usually you see in historical examples also.

So, Peter, for those listening who feel like, oh, God, I'm convinced by what Peter's saying.

I see the immiseration. I see the economics stagnation. I see the elite over production.

I might not know all of the language he's using, but I buy this overall argument. What do I do about it? What can people do about it? We don't want to live in end times. Organize.

Organize how? What do you mean? So what people who have no power, what we can do, we can start organizing as a social movement. And again, this would require some leaders. All right. Somebody would have to step forward and try to start doing this. So, for example, the New Geo didn't happen in isolation. There was a period preceding it called the Progressive Era. And the Progressive Era saw a pretty broad-based social movement mainly peopled by young professionals. So not necessarily working class, but people who were lower-ranked elites at best and maybe even not elites at all. So that's one thing. But also what's going to happen is that if the instability continues to increase, then eventually the governing elites start understanding that things are not going to go always the way they want. They become frightened, essentially. And that helps them to sharpen their minds to start looking for nonviolent solutions.

Well, when you say organize, though, like what do you mean by that? Organize around what? A new, new deal? We don't have to repeat exactly a new deal because United States is a different country. All right. And also, our science now is not yet as good. We were talking about social engineering. You don't like the term. But in any case, cleodynamics is not as precise as physics to be able to allow us. So personally, my goal is to continue working to increase our understanding of why societies do what they do. And that is important because we should get to the point where we should be able to have such good understanding that we actually plug the proposed reform into the model and see whether it results in any unintended consequences. All right? So that's, I see, as my role. But essentially, what tens of millions of us do is to start organizing and supporting those candidates. It could be left or right candidates who are proposing things like minimum wage. Increasing the minimum wage is a good way to shut down the wealth pump.

I'm amazed that this democratic administration has not done it. It's such an obvious thing to do. All right? Then, yes, we need to increase taxes on the wealthy. That will be part of the solution. I don't know precisely how we combine those different things. This is going to be part of political process and things. But we can start supporting those candidates, for example, that that are serious about increasing minimum wage.

Okay, Peter, last question. I know you're not a prophet, but you did predict the insane chaos, I would call it, of 2020. What do you think the headlines will be 10 years from now? And if that feels like too much of a ridiculous prediction, how does your understanding and your theory of history inform the way that you think the next few years or perhaps the next presidential election will play out? Yes. I'm very worried about 2024 because we now have two parties that say that they will not accept the win of another, that rhetoric is growing. And by the way, rhetoric is what precedes actual violence, is violent rhetoric, because most humans are not natural killers. And we need to get used to more violent atmosphere before we start being violent ourselves. And violent rhetoric is a preparation for that. So 2024 to me is going to be a really high probability break point when things can go back. Now, 10 years from now, we're talking about mid 2030s. Typically, these periods of heightened instability, they don't take many years, somewhere between 10 and 20 years. So what I hope is that in 2035, the headlines would be that, okay, we managed to get the worker wages to grow with economy finally in a sustainable way. So that's one possible outcome. The other possible outcome is the previous decade was so horrible, everybody tired of violence. So nobody wants to start violence again. But then when the new generation comes along, then they will have again the same type of turbulence happening. Yeah, sorry, I'm not, I'm not making a very clear case, but that's because essentially your future

is unpredictable. Now you hear a circle back to what you're saying. It really depends on us, collectively us, not you and me, although you can actually contribute quite a lot. You, by putting the right ideas out and helping people to choose better choices, you can make a difference, right? I can hopefully make a difference by making science better so we can use it to understand why we are in it and so on and so forth. So that perhaps, rather than setting a goal of how do we get together and solve everything in one year, right? We should think about how we

can start making small steps. So hope lies in counter-elites, but let's pray that they don't get too revolutionary or too violent. So dissident elites, yes. I think dissident elites are the ones. Yes, they are the ones who should give as much power as possible because they are trying to solve things in a non-violent way. Okay, I'm still left puzzling if I'm a counter-elite, a dissident elite or a revolutionary, but Peter Turchin, it was wonderful to have you on. Honestly, thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

Thanks as always for listening. If you were provoked by what Peter Turchin said, if you agreed with every word, if you find yourself wondering who is this guy and going to Google more, all of that's great. Please share this conversation with your friends, with your family, and use it to have an honest conversation of your own. And if you want to support the work we do it honestly, there's just one way to do it. It's by becoming a subscriber to the free press. You can do that by going to thefp.com, t-h-e-f-p.com, and becoming a subscriber today. I'll see you next time.