The Henry Mance Interview

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Forecaster Peter Turchin: 'The US is in a much more perilous state than Russia'

Academic's models predicted 2020 instability. Was it just luck?

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In 2010, the journal Nature asked experts to predict their fields a decade in the future. Google's director of research ventured that, by 2020, most search queries would be spoken, not typed. A Harvard geneticist said nano-memory devices would harness bacteria's ability to navigate the Earth's magnetic field.

Then Peter Turchin came forward. Originally an ecologist, he made perhaps the boldest prediction: the next decade was "likely to be a period of growing instability in the United States and western Europe". His models showed instability could spike "around 2020".

This was February 2010, before Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring; the Tea party was a novelty, Donald Trump was just a TV star. Yet in 2020, riots and demonstrations did rise sharply. Unlike other experts, Turchin seemed to have been vindicated.

Turchin's forecast was not simply a year of unrest, but a prolonged crisis. "These periods of high instability typically last many years. Five years is short; 10 to 15 years is the most typical length," he says now.

If he is right, we're not out of the woods — because we haven't tackled the biggest cause: since the 1970s, wealth has been funnelled from the poor to the rich. This "wealth pump" frustrates those at the bottom. "Two years of low inflation are not going to take care of it."

Those at the top, meanwhile, become too numerous. Too many rich people — Turchin gives Michael Bloomberg and Peter Thiel as examples — compete over a finite amount of political power. Too many graduates emerge from university overqualified. "What brings down the states is intra-elite infighting." Right now, Trump is "the counter-elite". The ruling class is "really throwing everything at him", says Turchin, citing the plethora of lawsuits.

"The question is whether there's going to be a macro-violence outbreak." By macro-violence, he means truly macro: civil war, revolution, political fragmentation, territorial break-up or foreign invasion. "In 10 to 15 per cent of cases, when societies get into these crises, they do avoid [macro-violence] . . . My prediction is not 100 per cent that we're going to get one of those things."

Meeting Turchin, I'm not sure if I am dealing with a human supercomputer or a stopped clock that happened to be right in 2020. "It could have happened simply by luck," he agrees, engagingly. Like most modern prophets, he falls back on the allure of science. In his book *End Times*, he argues that human societies are subject to universal rules, just like the insect populations he studied as an ecologist.

The son of a dissident Soviet physicist, expelled by Moscow in 1977, Turchin speaks with a thick Russian accent. His precise methods are often lost in breathless detail. His basic hypothesis is that societies exist on a cycle of integration (cohesion) followed by disintegration, ending in crisis. The cycle restarts roughly every 200 years.

"A couple of generations pass from a previous time of trouble. Elites forget about that and start reconfiguring the economy in ways that favour themselves."

In the Middle Ages, the elites were trained as killers. Now a very small proportion of the population goes to West Point [military academy]

To predict disintegration more precisely, Turchin tracks trends such as the size of the elite, the degree of partisanship and the ratio of the median wage to gross domestic product per head, a driver of popular discontent. In the US, the trends worsened twice: before the civil war and since the 1970s.

At the same time, Turchin suggests violence recurs every 50 years — in the US, roughly 1870, 1920, 1970, 2020 (but not 1820).

Again, this is partly about memory: after a violent event, one generation learns to be peaceful, but the third generation has forgotten the risks and opts for violence again.

Turchin has sought to tease out how crises emerge and end, by building a database of nearly 200 crises and near-crises — from the Bronze Age to the 20th century.

His methods are alien to the historical mainstream and to the common assumption that human societies are too different and context-dependent to form neat patterns. A

cynic might summarise his models as: good times don't last for ever.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama — no stranger to incorrect future-gazing — complained that Turchin's approach was "not very useful in making short-term predictions". By saying various futures are possible, is Turchin showing academic rigour by conceding his model's limits, or is he giving himself a get-out-of-jail free pass for any eventuality?

I ask if his prediction of instability was wholly correct. Although riots and demonstrations did rise in the US in 2020, other metrics he cited — lynchings and assassinations — did not. "Our police is a very efficient force for suppressing [violent urban riots]," he says, insisting that macro-violence could still break out.

In *End Times*, Turchin said Americans "grossly underestimate the fragility of the complex society in which we live". More recently, however, he has argued that complex societies are resilient. That follows further analysis of the historical record, he says.

"Really deep collapses are becoming more rare . . . We are more likely to resolve crises in not such violent ways . . . In the Middle Ages, the elites were trained as killers. Now a very small proportion of the population goes to West Point [military academy]."

In the modern period, elites have sometimes staved off the worst outcomes. Britain, Turchin argues, suffered decades of instability from the 1830s to the 1860s, but avoided revolution by abolishing food tariffs, widening the suffrage and allowing labour unions. For Turchin, these helped to address the root cause of instability: the fact that real wages had fallen between 1750 and 1800.

Wealthy Americans checked their own power between the 1930s and 1960s, accepting income tax rates of more than 90 per cent. But today's elites — by which Turchin means the richest 10 per cent — are unwilling to follow suit. "We are back to very similar attitudes that were prevalent during the Gilded Age."

Which society is closer to macro-breakdown: Russia or the US? "Definitely not Russia." External pressures have unified the country, he argues. Doesn't Russia suffer even worse economic inequalities than the US? No, says Turchin. The ratio of workers to vacancies is "very favourable to workers" since the invasion of Ukraine, after people fled the country or were drafted into the army, fewer immigrants arrived and industrial production increased.

Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed uprising was "a good stress test. Everybody was against him. Without doubt, the United States is in a much more perilous state right now."

hmm. Without doubt, the United States is in a much more perilous state right now." There is something disconcerting in Turchin's willingness to discuss the fate of societies in coldly amoral terms.

If individuals' choices matter, then Turchin's hope of predicting societies seems doomed to failure. In *End Times*, he says people "severely overestimate the power of rulers". More recently, he has said that selfless leaders may yet save the US from disaster. Which is it? "As societies move towards crisis, individuals probably cannot make too much difference. Once you get to the crisis, the trajectory is much less determined . . . I think that FDR mattered."

Surely it matters whether Joe Biden or Trump wins? "Not really, because neither of them are going to shut down the wealth pump." Biden's support for labour unions is "important because one way to help to shut down the wealth pump is to give more power to workers". But he hasn't managed to raise the minimum wage or to control immigration. "People may be wrong to think that immigrants take their jobs from them, but they think that, and in a democracy why do you want to piss off people?

"I am convinced that we overestimate the importance of individuals. [Vladimir] Putin is highly circumscribed . . . Let's forget about great men. Let's talk about geopolitical factors."

We are back to very similar attitudes that were prevalent during the Gilded Age

The war in Ukraine would have happened without Putin, Turchin argues, because the Russian elite felt threatened by Nato. Moreover, it is "almost a mathematical certainty" that Russia will win, because it has more capacity to produce the 152mm and 155mm artillery shells that break open trenches. (Phillips O'Brien, professor of strategic studies at St Andrews university, counters that the war will depend on ranged capacity and drones, and that European and US shell production is now rising faster than Russia's.)

To piece together the past, Turchin says he is working "with maybe 150 historians and archaeologists". But for most of the 5,000 years in question, even basic indicators are sketchy. Turchin wants a detailed time-series on the poor's subjective feelings of wellbeing. He admits that doesn't exist, so he uses real wages as a proxy. Critics say wage data is itself thin. Nor does Turchin's model include climatic variations. "You cannot include everything. You have to ignore even things you know have an impact, such as climate effect."

In the past, Turchin has talked of creating a Federal Reserve for societal risks. Given the Fed's errors in forecasting inflation, he now favours another analogy.

"One hundred years ago, people could not predict weather. Now we can predict weather a week ahead. What we would like is a social weather service that would collect a lot of data, put it into a big model, and the model would tell us, 'We're going to have a social quake several years ahead.' And we would start yelling, 'Political leaders, you've got to take notice.'"

Except the moisture in the atmosphere doesn't have free will, I say. "No, but we overestimate how much free will affects the movement of populations of millions of people."

Turchin's next project is to build a model for 10 countries "like China, UK, Russia, Germany. Then we run the model for 10 years. We publish the scripts on which the model is based. And we see what happens."

Yet, if crises come on 50- and 200-year cycles, Turchin may never have to predict another one in his lifetime. In his line of work, maybe you only need to be lucky once.

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