

Three Existential Threats to Civilization at the End of 2024, Part 1



By Steven Yates

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Not woke ideology, not Democrats. Not Russia, not China. Not climate. These are worse.

Author's note (I): although the opinions and conclusions expressed here are research-based, they are my own and should not be attributed to the NewsWithViews.com editorial staff or any other NewsWithViews.com writers.

Author's note (II): due both to the approach of Christmas and family issues outside my control, this article, delivered in three parts, will be my final work of 2024. Praying that all my readers will have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Introduction.

Three dangerous conditions afflict our civilization. They are: (1) massive and worsening economic inequality, (2) massive and worsening state indebtedness, and (3) the threat of nuclear war. Expanding:

(1) *Some* inequality is normal. Think Pareto distributions (80-20). I've seen these exemplified in countless circumstances. They are surprisingly precise. In any sales force, 80 percent of all sales will be generated by 20 percent of sellers. In any class I taught, I'd guesstimate that 80

percent of what was learned, was learned by 20 percent of the class. You'll probably spend 80 percent of your time today in 20 percent of your house / apartment / office.

It is normal that 80 percent of a civilization's wealth be in the hands of 20 percent of its population. That's our default setting.

This is *not* what we see today. What we see instead: well under 1 percent of the population controls over 99 percent of the wealth. This top well-under-1 percent of *haves* controls more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of *have-nots*.

This is potentially destabilizing, particularly if the sense exists among the *have-nots* – and it does – that the *haves* have somehow cheated.

(2) Debt kills civilizations no less than it devastates a person's financial life. Since Nixon killed the gold standard in 1971, the dollar has lost around 98 percent of its value.

This we call *currency debasement*.

It's the reason I could fill my pantry for a week for around \$25 when I was a grad student in the 1980s. The same amount of food now costs me between \$150 and \$200.

Currency debasement is part of what undermined the Roman Empire.

As the real driver of inflation – what's being inflated is the money supply – currency debasement is also destabilizing if you couple it with the first and give it time.

(3) The week before last, Ukraine deployed U.S.-made missiles deep into Russian territory where they resulted in several deaths of Russian military personnel.

The Bidenistas had green-lighted this move. Technically *the West is now in a hot war with Russia*.

Russia returned fire – conventionally – so far.

But only because Putin does *NOT* want to be the first national leader since the 1940s to try to end a military conflict with nukes. Even a tactical nuke would take things to the next level quickly!

We have Putin's restraint and not much else to thank for this conflict not having *already* gone nuclear.

What happens if his patience wears thin, or if he has a bad day?!

Summing this intro: If these states of affairs are not reversed, the West will follow its predecessors – Rome, Spain, France, the Ottomans, the British, etc. – into the history books. Assuming anyone is here to write them.

This is true no matter who sits in the White House.

Can Donald Trump accomplish what needs to be done? Maybe he'll surprise us, but I have my doubts!

Peter Turchin's Research into Why Civilizations Unravel.

We'll need to spend time on this.

Peter Turchin's *End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration* (2023) is one of the half-dozen or so most important books of the decade so far. It is one thing to look at specific decisions by deciders. If you want a good idea what's been happening *structurally* for almost a hundred years, read this book.

I'll rely for this article on Turchin's [recent Guardian piece](#). I know, I know, *The Guardian* tilts left. Bear with me here. Turchin is not an ideologue. I don't see him grinding axes. He's assembled a team of researchers in a new cross-disciplinary field he calls cliodynamics. This team has looked at over a dozen past civilizations and charted their

trajectories: their rise, their falls into complacency, their unraveling, their collapse.

Three factors, he argues, are invariably involved in civilization's decline and fall. All three are presently operating in the West, mostly unchecked.

They are: **public immiseration** (his term is 'popular' immiseration though it doesn't seem very *popular* to me), **elite overproduction** (we'll look at how he's using the term *elite* which is different from how I've used it), and **state breakdown** (following paths of what I've been calling narrative collapse).

Underwriting all three: worsening and potentially destabilizing economic inequality, far more extreme than Pareto distributions would justify.

Turchin is convinced that these factors explain Trump's victory, not just an electoral college victory but the popular vote as well – despite every Democrat-led effort to prevent it.

Let's take each in turn.

What do we mean, **public immiseration**?

Public Immiseration.

Turchin offers a history lesson, one not much told anymore. In this narrative, the Rooseveltian New Deal comes off looking rather good. That will be a red flag for some readers, but again, bear with me.

What was accomplished back then, in Turchin's considered opinion, was a balancing of competing interests of corporations, workers, and government. No one is saying the system was perfect or couldn't have been done differently and possibly better. What did result – once we got past a world war – was the unprecedented economic growth across the broad

swath of the populations of the 1950s and 1960s. A rising tide really did lift a great number of boats. Rising expectations psychologically empowered, e.g., blacks, who demanded that their own boats be allowed to rise.

The U.S. had become the strongest economy the world had ever seen, and with the moonshots, etc., on the horizon we aimed for the sky – literally!

The American Dream became our official narrative – and at the time, it seemed not just credible but one of the greatest stories ever told!

The reasons why aren't hard to see. Energy was affordable; housing was affordable; families were relatively stable. The prevailing belief was that if you were willing to work in order to achieve, you could achieve any goal you set your mind to. Increasing prosperity backed this up.

The Coming of the Neoliberal Era.

Turchin attributes the success of the era to a “Great Compression.” The superrich were taxed. Union strength checked corporate power. Salaries reflected this across the board. “For roughly 50 years,” Turchin writes, “the interests of workers and the interests of owners were kept in balance, and overall income inequality remained remarkably low.”

These arrangements began to break down in the 1970s. Nixon scrapped the gold standard on August 15, 1971. That was a turning point. The door was open to financialization and eventually rampant speculation—and money-printing on top of money-printing!

For a variety of reasons including the energy crisis of the early 1970s, the economy began to struggle. During the Carter years, it fell into “stag-flation.” Unions had grown corrupt in themselves and were losing their power. When Reagan [broke the air traffic controllers strike in 1981](#), unions were

further weakened. Taxes on the highest earners were cut during this era. A narrative had taken hold that if corporations could do pretty much as they saw fit within the bounds of the law, prosperity would “trickle down” to everyone else. This wasn’t credible, and it’s small wonder liberals had a field day with it.

Go back to 1970. That year, University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman published the article that arguably kicked off the neoliberal era: [“The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits.”](#)

Adages appeared such as *let the free market work!* What happened was: corporations were unbound. We saw *regulatory capture*. Big Pharma and regulating agencies (CDC, FDA) shared revolving-door relationships. One result was an industry, one of the most lucrative in the country, indemnified against lawsuits for harm done by its products. This isn’t exactly a basis for trust in these products.

Leviathan investment banks also captured the SEC and other regulators. Goldman-Sachs, the U.S Treasury Dept., the Federal Reserve System: we saw people with all three on their resumes.

Neoliberalism is *not* conservatism, nor is it libertarianism. These get confused since all three appeal to “market forces.” To a conservative, some institutions and states of affairs *are conditions of civilizational health and so non-negotiable*: family stability, for example, as well as community cohesion, based on trust established over long periods of time, on which *one can’t place a price tag*. So to a conservative, the marketplace is not absolute. Libertarianism is closer to neoliberalism in insisting on the absoluteness of private property rights and the valuation of all goods and services by the marketplace. How does neoliberalism differ? Despite its rhetoric it isn’t hostile to government. Government is the marketplace’s (i.e., corporations’) protector. Trade freely within government-created “free trade zones,” the neoliberal

says. Beyond that, what can't be monetized, can wither and die.

Among the results of this philosophy are privatized prisons run for profit which are humanitarian disasters. Even those convicted of heinous crimes are human beings.

The reversal of Turchin's "Great Compression" brought about the increased income inequality that led to the conditions he directly identifies as threats to American stability.

It goes without saying – because so many of us lived through those decades – that families unraveled partly as a consequence of the declining fortunes of "average" Americans. It is well-known that inflation-adjusted wages began to stagnate in the 1970s. In addition, factories closed as corporations sought cheaper labor in foreign countries, i.e., "outsourcing": first Mexico, with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and then China with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade II (GATT II) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

"Free trade" meant the freedom of corporations to do as they pleased, while their (former) employees got stuck with the bill. The rich got richer ... in spades!

The "Wealth Pump" and the Road to the Second Gilded Age.

In 1965, the CEO-to-worker compensation ratio was 21 to 1. ([Source.](#)) In 1978, CEOs were paid on average 30 times more than their average employees. By 2000, the former were paid more than 372 times what their employees were paid. ([Source.](#))

The CEO-to-working compensation ratio was 21-to-1 in 1965. It had risen to 366-to-1 by 2000.

Inflation, meanwhile, had taken its toll. Average Americans' incomes stagnated while the cost of living rose steadily – this did more than feminism to get women into the workplace, as the one-breadwinner family became harder to sustain. No

longer were energy or housing as affordable. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s mortgages and rentals rose steadily. Having lived in an apartment during those years, I experienced this personally. I also witnessed the disappearance of local ownership as apartment complexes were drawn under leviathan property-management corporations.

Turchin again: "The result was a decline in many aspects of quality of life for the majority of Americans. One shocking way this became evident was in changes to the average life expectancy, which stalled and even went into reverse (and this started well before the Covid pandemic). This is what we term 'popular immiseration.'"

What was at work here was a perverse "wealth pump" that siphoned money from the poor and the middle class and redistributed it to the rich, via mechanisms financialized capitalism creates. I've sometimes spoken of welfare-statism-in-reverse: redistribution of wealth *upwards*. These are different ways of saying the same thing.

Immigration, illegal or otherwise, has been a factor. The corporate mind loves immigration. It drives down wages and thus saves on labor costs. Americans who do not live in gated communities are suspicious of it. They see it disrupting their neighborhoods, the schools where they send their kids, etc. Those inside the gated communities (whose kids attend elite private academies) don't have to deal with the consequences of their decisions.

Communities, as noted above, are built on longstanding bonds of trust which cannot be reduced to economics. Open borders policies resulting in colonization by outsiders disrupt those bonds, as well as the sense ordinary people have of losing control of their lives at the hands of unaccountable elites.

This explains places like Springfield, Ohio.

Turchin compares the period we'd entered by the late 1980s to

the Gilded Age, that period from 1870 to 1900, during which time John D. Rockefeller Sr. amassed a fortune and made deals with other “robber barons” (as their critics called them) in various other industries – steel, coal, etc. – to use his railroads exclusively, thus destroying competition. “Competition is a sin,” Rockefeller is supposed to have said.

We’re in a Second Gilded Age.

Consider the present-day online world. When the Internet first became a presence in our lives, there were hundreds of small, autonomous companies engaging in e-commerce.

Today’s online world is completely dominated by a handful of leviathans whom many of us have started calling Big Tech. I probably don’t have to list them.

Our overall online experience has become progressively less pleasant as corporate-owned platforms have become more encircling and powerful. Last year, author Cory Doctorow coined a term for this degradation of our experience which includes planned obsolescence, being slammed with ads, navigating unnecessary complexity, increasing inability to get your content in front of an audience, and finding it increasingly difficult to reach a human being if you need technical support.

Doctorow’s term is [*enshittification*](#).

The Second Gilded Age began well before the 2000s but really kicked in during the 2000s and 2010s. It has worsened as we got past Covid and into the New Normal.

Charles Hugh Smith supplies a number of charts in his recent article [here](#).

Who reaped the greatest windfalls of the Covid lockdowns? Big Tech (and Big Pharma).

Many others saw their lives upended: small businesses

destroyed, etc.

Many of us had our expectations systemically thwarted years before.

We come to ***elite overproduction***.

END of Part 1; Part 2 in few days.

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Steven Yates is a (recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored three books, more than 20 articles, numerous book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself.

In 2012 he moved to Chile. He married a Chilean national in 2014. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

As to whether he'll stay in Chile ... stay tuned!

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate [here](#) and become a Patron if

you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained [here](#) or [here](#).

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten [here](#).

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