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## AWAITING THE DEMISE OF THE LIBERAL ORDER: HISTORICISING THE CRISIS OF LIBERALISM<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This review article analyses the merits and shortcomings of three recent works by Matthew Rose, Peter Turchin, and Krishnan Nayar about the crisis in Western liberal democracies and liberalism. By exploring the intellectual and economic causes of the crisis, these authors are trying to establish a historical model that would explain the current crisis through a comprehensive account of the development of Western societies. In doing so, they identify the detrimental role of the elites and the growing inequalities as the major factor that historically contributes to the demise of liberal values, endangering democratic rule of law. Therefore, the three books are a warning that the demise of the liberal order will bring about the resurgence of right-wing authoritarianism. However, all three authors avoid discussing the nature of liberalism as the dominant ideology in the West. This article presents a criticism of such models, arguing that any discussion of the crisis of liberalism which avoids considerations about liberalism itself and liberal ideologies, necessarily fails to encapsulate the actual experience of the crisis. In addition, these models limit history's usefulness in interpreting the causes of the crisis and preventing its consequences.

### KEYWORDS

crisis of liberal democracies, capitalism, elites, inequality, right-wing authoritarianism, Turchin, Rose, Nayar

In recent years, challenges and concerns facing liberal democratic societies, and liberalism itself, as the dominant ideology in many Western countries, has started to coalesce around the title of "crisis of liberalism". Although a complicated term, liberalism is usually understood to denote ideology that emphasises, among other things, individual rights, the rule of law, representative democracy, and limited economic interventionism by the government. Various

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challenges to these core values constitute the crisis of liberal order. Far from a uniform phenomenon, this crisis presents a complex set of issues, ranging from increasing inequalities under neoliberal economics, the rise of populism and authoritarianism, through cultural and identity concerns, to the insecurities caused by globalisation.

These and other challenges undermining the stability and effectiveness of Western liberal democracies are increasingly attracting scholarly attention. Over the previous years, extensive literature appeared focusing on various political, economic, and cultural implications of the purported crisis.<sup>2</sup> Within this vast literature, a specific thread gains prominence – the dynamics between the crisis of liberalism and political instability, in particular, the rise of right-wing authoritarianism. This review article analyses three recent, and very different, books that explore this thread: *A World After Liberalism: Five Thinkers who Inspired the Radical Right* by Matthew Rose (2021), *Liberal Capitalist Democracy: A God that Failed* by Krishnan Nayar (2023), and *End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration* by Peter Turchin (2023).<sup>3</sup>

This article focuses on the central assumption shared by these books. Namely, the three authors emphasise that to understand the possible demise of the liberal order, as well as to avert the adverse consequences (the chief of them being the ascent of authoritarian tendencies), we need to uncover historical origins behind the decline of liberalism. They believe that through a comprehensive model of historical development in Western societies, they will find a key for interpreting the current crisis-ridden reality. With limited success, Matthew Rose dissects the intellectual sources of today's anti-liberal narratives, in an attempt to connect the current radical right with critics of liberalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Krishnan Nayar, on the other hand, seeks to uncover the link between the faltering of contemporary liberal democracies and the adverse effects of capitalist modernisation. Meanwhile, Peter Turchin attempts to deliver a systematic historical model, to provide us with empirical “regularities” in history that should reveal the connection between the crisis of liberalism and current macroeconomic factors. Central for the latter two are the roles played by the elites in perpetuating the crisis. While the insights provided by these three authors are undeniably through-provoking, they also share important limitations, warranting careful analysis. Thus, this review article aims

2 Among numerous examples, scholarly work on the topic ranges from substantial insights into the nature of the crisis of liberal order such as Piketty 2019, Rodrik 2011, Müller 2017, Mounk 2018, Rupnik 2018, Fukuyama 2015, including the more recent Fukuyama 2022, and Daneen 2018, to popular literature such as Applebaum 2021, Snyder 2017, Harari 2019, Mishra 2018 and Lilla 2017.

3 NB Given their very recent publication, Nayar's and Turchin's books were only accessible through the UK's Electronic Legal Deposit (Cambridge University Library). Therefore, all references to this book in this article will not entail pagination, since this type of format is not accessible in the electronic legal deposit, as they do not always correspond to the published editions. Rather, specific quotations and notes in this article will refer to chapters and subsections of their original text.

to examine the merits and constraints of their approach, with a particular focus on the purported burgeoning encroachment of authoritarianism.

Matthew Rose's *A World after Liberalism* explores the enduring impact of five critics of liberalism: Oswald Spengler, Julius Evola, Francis Parker Yockey, Alain de Benoist, and Samuel Francis. At the same time, the book is a warning against the potential consequences of a rightist paradigm replacing liberal democracy. Rose's aim is clear: if liberalism collapses, the West enters uncharted waters. He highlights that pre-liberal world was marked by oppression, ignorance, violence, and superstition. In his outlook, liberalism taught us to build societies on the values of freedom and equality. The book underscores the peril of even contemplating a post-liberal world, suggesting this would challenge our long-held beliefs about history's direction (Rose 2021: 1–2). In Rose's narrative, liberal values are portrayed as the champions of history, and safeguarding them is our paramount duty, especially in the face of radical right influences depicted as the true "other" of Western culture (Rose 2021: 16).

Responding to the same crisis as Rose, Krishnan Nayar offers a divergent viewpoint in his *Liberal Capitalist Democracy: A God that Failed*. Instead of depicting it as the core value of the West, Nayar contends that liberalism has primarily functioned as an ideological tool to reconcile democracy and capitalism, asserting that it justified the notion that capitalist progress was a prerequisite for democratisation in Western nations. By examining the historical evolution of six modernity pioneers (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Japan), Nayar challenges the "big liberal myth" that capitalism inevitably leads to democracy. He shifts focus away from intellectual debates for or against liberalism and instead examines the interplay between elites and liberal narratives. Capitalism is more often than not detrimental to democratic development. Therefore, Nayar's book belongs to the body of literature that treats the crisis of liberalism as a sub-crisis within much larger problems in the nature of capitalist development.<sup>4</sup>

Peter Turchin's book, *End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration* delves deeper into the connection between the current economic situation and liberalism, specifically exploring the ramifications of income and wealth disparities for the liberal agenda. Turchin's work is a continuation of his extensive project, spanning two decades, aimed at explaining political instabilities, revolutions, collapses, and societal awakenings using quantitative evidence. This project has given rise to a distinctive historical methodology called *cliodynamics*, which seeks to bring scientific reasoning into history by combining theoretical and quantitative approaches to apply a dynamical systems perspective to the study of the past (Turchin, Nefedov 2009; Turchin 2007; Turchin 2008). *End Times* directly addresses the purported crisis discussed here by employing quantitative methods to analyse metahistorical processes. This analysis revealed the crucial role elites play in "managing" the current crisis. Although

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4 Within this literature, similar argument to Nayar's can be seen in Zuboff 2019, Klein 2008, and MacLean 2017.

Turchin's method is the centre point of his entire opus, this essay will not focus on providing criticism for the school of thought that suggests major historical processes can be analysed through scientific (or proto-scientific) means.

But before discussing these works in further detail, it is crucial to point out a stark omission in all three books. Liberalism, and especially liberal democracy is the central concept of their stories. Yet, quite remarkably, none of the three authors dedicate much attention on the nature of liberalism itself. Whereas it is rather common and sometimes justifiable to take the common-sensical meaning of such prevalent term for the sake of clarity and in order to avoid unnecessary conceptual discussion, such an approach is blatantly insufficient once the historical perspective is the focal point of entire argumentation. While all three authors insist on historical account of the current crisis, they fail to acknowledge the complexities of the concept they are trying to describe. This omission will prove to be the central deficiency in these works.

Liberalism is a remarkably diverse and complicated concept. Judith Shklar aptly summarised its ambiguous nature: “[I]n the course of so many years of ideological conflict [liberalism] seems to have lost its identity completely. Overuse and overextension have rendered it so amorphous that it can now serve as an all-purpose word, whether of abuse or praise” (Shklar 1998: 3). Shklar tried to find the least common denominator of all types of liberalism, arguing that liberalism can be defined as a political doctrine with “only one overriding aim: to secure the political condition that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom” (Shklar 1998: 3–5). Others have found different common denominators. Jeremy Waldron argued that commitment to freedom is “too vague and abstract” and suggests liberalism entails those commitments that make acceptable all aspects of the social to every last individual (Waldron 1987: 127–131, 140). Ronald Dworkin concluded that certain conception of equality is “the nerve of liberalism” (Dworkin 1985: 183).

As with the authors discussed here, it is quite common for interpretations of liberalism to draw from historical accounts, legitimising one or the other statement about liberalism's core concepts, ranging from liberty, and authority, to autonomy, and equality (Bell 2014: 686). However, as John Rawls astutely observed, all invocations of history in any account of liberalism usually present “schematic version of speculative history” (Rawls 2007: 11). Every account that seeks to propose a unified and coherent historically-based account of either in favour or against liberalism will always “fail to encompass the deep divisions between professed variants of liberalism” (Bell 2014: 687). In his seminal article, Duncan Bell describes liberalism as a metacategory of Western political discourse – a contradictory term, often meaning at the same time a vanguard project constitutive of modernity itself, a fine-grained normative political philosophy, and a hegemonic mode of governmentality or a justificatory ideology of unrestrained capitalism: “Self-declared liberals have supported extensive welfare states and their abolition; the imperial civilising mission and its denunciation; massive global redistribution of wealth and the radical inequalities of the existing order” (Bell 2014: 683).

This sensitivity towards the nuances in the definition of liberalism, as well as inconsistencies among those who consider themselves liberals is exactly what is missing in Rose's, Nayar's, and Turchin's accounts. Retrojecting their, more or less, monolithic, albeit diverse, accounts of liberalism onto their historical accounts is even more problematic. Conversely, Bell's article thoroughly demonstrates the transformation not only of term 'liberalism' but of the very concept and ideas that inform it throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, showing that there cannot be a plausible claim that liberalism constitutes a definitive body of thought. Importantly for our story in this article, Bell demonstrates that the idea of 'liberal democracy', i.e. the marriage of liberalism to the democratic rule of law, as opposed to various forms of authoritarianism and state incursion into various rights, emerged rather slowly in the interwar period, becoming an all-encompassing narrative only much later, after World War Two. It took almost two centuries of academic debates and occasional retroactive reconceptualization of intellectual origins for liberalism to become a politico-intellectual tradition centred on individual freedom in the context of constitutional government. Furthermore, adding toleration and the autonomy of the individual (or, introjection of the concept of natural law onto the idea of human rights) to the core values of liberalism took a couple more decades. Thus, only in mid-Cold War liberalism and liberal democracy gained its broader account, observable in almost all current literature about the crisis of liberalism – that of the “culmination” of Western history and a synonym of modern Western democracies (Bell 2014: 699–701).<sup>5</sup> Sensitivity towards this decade if not century-long conceptual development would be necessary in any account trying to place the current crisis of liberal democracies into a historical perspective. As this article shows, this is main shortcoming of accounts offered by Rose, Nayar, and Turchin.

Despite Rose's insensitivity to the nuances of the central concept he is investigating, his *A World after Liberalism* has a lot to offer. In analysing five thinkers who, as he claims, inspired the contemporary radical rightists, Rose analyses their attacks on liberalism's core values. One significant contribution is Rose's exploration of the relationship between Christianity and far-right ideology. Had he delved deeper into this, the book could have been more innovative. Rose divorces the radical right from Christianity, highlighting their suspicion of it as the origin of liberal values (Rose 2021: 14). While this somewhat obscures the more relevant rightist criticism of Enlightenment as the source of liberalism, Rose still shows that liberalism is criticized as a secular manifestation of Christianity's sacredness of the individual. Christianity is faulted for fostering individual freedoms, undermining inequalities, being rationalistic, open, and apolitical—making it the source of the liberal values it is often blamed for obstructing or rejecting (Rose 2021: 141–142).

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5 For example, Rawls's crucial contribution to the redefinition of liberalism in the Cold War is best seen in Katrina Forrester's *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

The second major contribution of *A World after Liberalism* lies in Rose's specific perspective on the crisis of liberalism. He interprets radical right's ideology as the response to the particular aspect of this crisis – crisis of belonging, which requires him to engage in discussions on the human nature (Rose 2021: 10). The five thinkers investigated by Rose criticise liberalism for attempting to structure society around an idealised vision of humans disconnected from all attachments, whose primary needs are prosperity, peace, and pleasure. Human beings, in this outlook, are rights-bearing individuals who pursue their own understanding of the good life. The five thinkers present an alternative vision: humans are not defined through acts of individual choice and self-expression alone; they are rather social creatures who find meaning through relationships they have not chosen and responsibilities they cannot relinquish. Identity is thus embedded in kinship and descent, inheriting certain cultural and social patrimony (Rose 2021: 154). Furthermore, the crisis of belonging caused by liberalism means that politics had been deprived of meaning, since liberal appeals to justice and equality could not summon real human loyalties or inspire greatness (Rose 2021: 7). The rightist thinkers analysed here consider human endeavour as a pursuit of greatness, and criticise liberalism for restricting this. Such perspective allows Rose to interpret anxieties about identity politics as the central feature of the crisis of liberalism, uniting identity issues and perceived lack of any possibility of greatness. This and the previously mentioned take on Christianity are the two most important aspects of this book.

That being said, Rose never fully discloses the criteria for selecting these particular authors. As mentioned earlier, the absence of any discussion on liberalism itself means that these authors attack very different kinds of liberalism. Furthermore, Rose never fully demonstrates the connection between his authors and the current radical right (with the sole exception of Samuel Francis). It is not quite clear how Oswald Spengler or Julius Evola, being very prominent among anti-liberal intellectuals, influence the current alt-right movements, who are, according to Rose, remarkably anti-intellectual. Additionally, there seems to be no obvious link among the five authors themselves. Francis Parker Yockey seems to be a charlatan compared to Spengler, while Samuel Francis is an amateur compared to de Benoist. The relevance, importance, and influence of all five authors are so different that placing them within a same narrative seems to be an overstretch.

Yet, Rose still tries to fit them into his overall argument that the five thinkers contributed to the crisis of liberalism by influencing the radical right's anxieties about identity politics, among other things. To do this, Rose investigates the ideologies of the five authors through their cultural outlooks. He believes that culture is a launching point of radical right influences (Rose 2021: 5). Hence, Rose investigates those works that criticise the cultural condition of the West, as part of their wider criticism of liberalism. For example, Rose places central focus on Spengler's argument in *Hour of Darkness* that Western culture is the product of unique ambition to challenge human finitude. Therefore, it enforces

an ethic that encourages the loftiest human personalities. It is a culture that is based on giants and geniuses, a “Faustian ethic” that strives for greatness, a heroic culture in other words. The most important point Rose takes from Spengler is that “liberalism detests every kind of greatness, everything that towers, rules, [that] is superior” (Spengler 1934: 35). The appeal to these semi-Nietzschean aristocratic virtues allows Rose to analyse Italian far-right ideologue Julius Evola alongside Spengler. Evola argued for a ‘world of Tradition’ in which the ‘man of tradition’ would always be aware of a superior dimension of existence, which would therefore be fundamentally different to the world of liberalism. Within such a tradition, all social and political life were to be elevated into something ritualistic, “becoming activities whose very repetitiveness offered a glimpse of an unchanging eternal realm.” Evola argued for a way of thinking that exemplified hierarchical and aristocratic values during a time of liberal decadence (Rose 2021: 40, 48).

So, it can be said that both Spengler and Evola attack the perceived decadence and weakness in Western culture, which is a direct product of liberalism. And while it can be said that both were relevant in various intellectual debates throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rose offers only very limited evidence for how any of them inspired the current far right. Even less can be said about Francis Parker Yockey’s role as the source of radical right thought. In many ways a bizarre and contradictory character, Yockey wrote *Imperium*, a historical revisionist book claiming that the Western allies came off weaker after their victory in World War Two because they retreated from the Third World and lost their cultural dominance (Rose 2021: 69). The only link between Yockey, on one hand side, and Spengler and Evola, on the other, is Yockey’s understanding that the Western retreat from world dominance is the result of liberalism’s espousal of weakness.

Alain de Benoist’s position is somewhat different. Responding to the turmoil in Paris in May 1968, de Benoist argues that the proper foundation of rightist thinking is nominalism – a metaphysical doctrine that denied the real existence of universals. Nominalism would maintain that only particular beings or objects exist, and that universals are merely conventional names invented by the mind. It denies reason’s ability to know universal truths or natures, which he takes to be the main assumption of the liberal order. In Benoist’s reading, only a worldview based on nominalism can defend the traditional way of life and more importantly, defend excellence, heroism, and honour (Rose 2021: 91). Additionally, Benoist subscribes to the idea that humans desire recognition of their equal dignity, and that human identity will be profoundly wounded by the absence or distortion of this recognition. However, he rejects the notion that tymotics operate on the individual level. Instead, he claims tymotic progression applies to entire cultures, a collectivity rather than the individual that becomes recognised. Oddly enough, such a system can simultaneously celebrate both diversity and hierarchical order with its exclusion. An open society is possible within a closed society. This led Benoist to claim that the atrocities of 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as European colonialism were a product of erasing group differences, rather than maintaining them (Rose 2021: 101–102).

Spengler, Evola, and de Benoist not only have a very different understanding of what is wrong with liberalism, but they also belong to very different periods and intellectual cultures. Spengler's interwar Germany, Evola's post-war Italy, and de Benoist's late-20<sup>th</sup> century France are very different cultures, and Rose never explores in any detail the connection between the radical rightist ideologies in those three contexts. Needless to say, the types of liberalism attacked are profoundly different, and although various directions of contemporary alt-right roughly correspond to them, we never see how they interact together. Therefore, it seems that the book is a case study of five different thinkers, rather than a comprehensive analysis of how their thoughts affected the current alt-right. The only exception to this impression is Rose's in-depth analysis of Samuel Francis. The chapter on Francis is the sole part of Rose's narrative that perfectly fits the title of the book: we can clearly see how Francis's peculiar thought directly influenced the current alt-right in the United States, ranging from various nativists, to racists and Trumpists. Rose's account of Rose also parallels important claims made by Nayar and Turchin.

Francis, a forceful anti-liberal, dedicated most of his career to the criticism of the Republican Party for their inability to face what he saw the imminent collapse of conservative politics in the United States. Unusual for a radical rightist, Francis argued that the ideological basis of the Republican Party has altered beyond recognition. Rather than free-market orthodoxy, small vs. big government controversy, or traditionalism in social outlooks, Francis believed nationalism and populism need to become the centre points of the Republican message. Basically, he was among the first to pay closer attention to a particular type of working-class, lower to middle income whites in the US, who are not average conservatives, as they do not support neoliberal orthodoxies, such as free globalised market or limited government, but are instead fiercely nationalistic. Comprising 25% of the electorate, they vote consistently for either Democrats or Republicans, but their worldview does not correspond to any of the parties. They defend entitlements and unions, and hate big corporations and free trade. Yet, they oppose welfare and school busing, and were very conservative regarding social issues, especially racial questions. Francis claimed that this unexplored group are the "remaining core of the fractured American nation" (Rose 2021: 112, 124–125).

Basically, they elected Donald Trump, and it turned out that Francis's essays offer a compelling explanation of how the former unionised working class of Michigan or Wisconsin could have voted for a billionaire populist from 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. What used to be either Democratic voters or far fringes of the Republican Party have, since 2016, become the mainstream of American nativism and nationalism. Francis's main argument, which influenced the movement around Trump is that liberalism has become part of the mainstream Republican Party, through the adoption of neoliberalism. He was among the first to argue that the Republicans have betrayed their base, leaving them disenfranchised, and the first to claim that the Republicans need to adopt an anti-establishment narrative in order to impose their "true" political agenda, an anti-neoliberal

one. Basically, neglecting its natural political base in middle-class whites, was according to Francis a true disaster, and an extension of the liberal ideology onto the American “core” (Rose 2021: 128).

Samuel Francis’s magnum opus *Leviathan and its Enemies*, although a badly written pseudo-philosophy, takes the liberal governmentality of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century United States as the crucial reason for the collapse of rightist perspectives. He interprets the conflict between liberalism and conservatism as antagonism between rival elites and their supporters. This is based on the premise that new elites are trying to displace those that preceded them. In his system, the old elites are the liberal bourgeoisie, defined not in terms of habits or lifestyle, but by the social basis of their power. So, their power currently lies in private firms and institutions, inherited property, Protestantism and kinship networks. Although they dominated America since the Civil War, their power was gradually uprooted by the emerging mass society. The problem is that the conservative elites have become ideologically integrated into the structures of the liberal elites, which is why they are failing to represent their natural supporters. Francis believed the greatest mistake of the conservative elites was that they started ignoring the relationship between their own ideology and its disintegrating social basis. Their emphasis on individual liberty, free markets, and moral traditionalism, has undermined the class interests of the conservative base. In this sense, Francis’s criticism of liberalism has less to do with liberalism itself, and more with the fact that liberalism happens to be a ruling ideology. He understood liberalism as an ideology which does what every ideology does, i.e. provides a justification for the rule of an elite minority (Rose 2021: 117–122).

This position is crucial to understand the link between anti-liberal critics and the radical right. By focusing attention to the deficiencies of non-liberal movements, Francis, and many alt-right supporters today equate criticism of liberalism with the criticism of the establishment. Liberalism is taken to be the expression of the establishment, the elites, or mainstream politics, and participation in this arrangement is what prevents any opposing ideologies to take hold. The current crisis has more to do with the fact that forces that should have opposed liberalism failed to do so, rather than with particular liberal values. Thus, Rose’s chapter on Francis clarifies this relationship between crisis of liberalism and increasing disbelief in the system itself. As it turns out, this is the most relevant connection between an anti-liberal thinker and radical right in Rose’s book.

The position of the elites towards the crisis of liberalism is the central feature of both Peter Turchin’s and Krishnan Nayar’s books. Unlike Rose, they are not searching for intellectual sources of the current crisis, but they are trying to provide a comprehensive historical account for its emergence. Nayar’s *Liberal Capitalist Democracy: A God that Failed* provides a criticism of liberalism from the left and argues that the crisis of liberalism is, first and foremost, a crisis of capitalism. By exploring the relationship between liberalism, capitalism, and democracy, Nayar primarily attacks the position that capitalist

development is the precursor of democratisation. In this triad, liberalism is not the chief point of criticism – in fact, Nayar, more or less, agrees with core liberal values.<sup>6</sup> Instead, liberalism is understood as the ideological tool, a “liberal myth”, through which the narrative that capitalism brings democratisation is sustained (Nayar 2023: “Why this Book was written”). Central for this narrative is his argument that the role of elites in transitional economies determines the relationship between democracy and capitalism. In fact, the liberal myth actually obstructs the fact that rampant capitalist elites more often lead to rightist autocratic regimes, rather than liberal democracies.

In analysing long and more than complicated period between Oliver Cromwell and Donald Trump, Nayar argues that the pre-World War Two capitalism, what he calls Darwinian capitalism (defined as pre-consumerist, pre-welfare state capitalism of severe economic instability) does not contribute to democratisation of societies. Naturally, it is very difficult to present such a sweeping account of 400-year-long development with six case studies without succumbing to generalisations. Nayar is no exception to this. In essence, the entire historical analysis in this book can be reduced to the following claim: capitalism was not the precursor to the democratisation of the society, because capitalism was, in most situations except Britain and somewhat the United States, an attempt of aristocracy to protect its interests and, through democratisation, to adjust to the capital flows in order to preserve the elite status they enjoyed. Preserving the elites and working together with capitalism, in Nayar’s analysis, more often than not brings about rightist form of government.

The only two cases that avoided right-wing response to capitalist development were Britain and the United States. This is mostly linked to the gradual political evolution that took place in the English political culture since the Glorious Revolution. Nayar emphasises two reasons for the success of English and American revolutions. In the English case, the supremacy of parliament and gradual retreat of feudalism led to a form of political culture that was inherently liberal, i.e. a political system that prevented the aristocracy to abuse new forms of capitalism to their advantage. Similarly, in the case of United States, the concept of popular sovereignty contributed to a more even capitalist development (Nayar 2023: “The English and American Revolutions led to Democracy”). One major problem with this account is that it avoids historical contingencies. For example, Nayar argues that the fact that industrialisation first happened in England is a mere coincidence and has nothing to do with the political or economic order (Nayar 2023: *ibid.*). In fact, Nayar claims that Russia, Germany, or Japan were much better placed to enforce industrialisation,

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6 To avoid dealing with ideological and conceptual framework later on, Nayar defines liberalism at the very beginning as “a rejection of autocracy as a form of government even if not necessarily backing universal suffrage, requiring freedom of speech, religion, and equality under law, assuming a mainly market-based economy” significantly generalising the issue he speaks about throughout the book in Nayar 2023: “A Note on Nomenclature”.

because they had been able to quell unrest more effectively and enforce major reforms faster compared to Britain. Thus, Britain is a unique model of development which cannot be replicated, since democratisation began in Britain before industrialisation, thus preventing major influences by the aristocratic elites. Nayar's major point in discussing Britain (and the US, to an extent) is that liberal revolutions are only successful when they crush the elites.

This is precisely why capitalism did not lead to democracy in his other examples— Russia, Japan, Germany, and France. Liberal revolutions in these countries were either unsuccessful or failed to quell the power of aristocracy. Hence, ruling elites, this time through liberal ideology, continued their grip over the economy. Nayar's argument is that the elites, confronted with reformist figures, chose to support the authoritarian regimes, rather than risk their property. France is a 'transitional' case, so to say. The revolution secured the economic transition needed – it did not fully destroy the aristocracy, but it reduced their control over the economy in favour of new elites, the capitalists (Nayar 2023: "But what about the French Revolution? Was it necessary for democracy?"). These new elites, dependent on expanding capitalism, were not conducive to democratisation of France, and their order was later on reduced to semi-autocracy under Louis Napoleon (Nayar 2023: "Louis Napoleon, Scorned by Marx, Becomes a Successful Modernising Autocrat"). When it comes to Russia, Germany, and Japan, Nayar argues that capitalists "lost" the modernisation process. Because the aristocracy had been preserved, no democratisation could have taken place. Nayar attempts to create a story in which a top-down modernisation was imposed by the autocrats simply because they had to do this in order to survive. Once these elites adjusted to the new economic reality, they kept their powers much longer than in France, not to mention Britain (Nayar 2023: "Liberal Democratic Ideology Failed: The Efficacy of Modernizing Aristocratic Autocracy in Germany").

The leitmotif of the historical account in *Liberal Capitalist Democracy* is that authoritarian modernisation, rather than democracy, was the natural, favoured trend of capitalism, and that liberalism served to justify this. Nayar is at pains to show that it is far more likely for capitalism to fuel right-wing extremism than usually imagined. This brings him to modern times, which despite comprising a shorter part of the book seems to be Nayar's central focus. In accordance with the overall argument of the book, Nayar tries to argue that apparent connection between capitalist development and democratisation in Western world after World War Two is merely an extension of the "liberal myth." Moreover, the transition to neoliberalism is presented as the return to the natural state of capitalism (Nayar 2023: "Communism Saved Capitalist Democracy from Fascism and Helped Reform Capitalism").

"Liberal myth" obscured the real reason capitalism fared so well in the post-war period. Nayar argues there was no structural reason for capitalism to succeed in democratising Western societies. Instead, capitalism underpinned democracy exclusively because of the Cold War, i.e. democratic governments in capitalist economies were developed mostly because of the challenges posed

by the Russian and Chinese revolutions. In other words, communist threat rescued democracy in the West (Nayar 2023: *ibid.*) Namely, as long as the communist/socialist mode of development presented a clear threat to western market-driven modernisation, liberal democracies were entangled in a sort of check-and-balance dichotomy with the communist East. Failure of this arrangement was, in Nayar's reading, the reason neoliberal practices, i.e. the reduction of state regulatory powers, became the standard form of capitalism in the West. In other words, the "total dismissal of communism [in late 1970s and 1980] accompanied a fierce resurgence of free-market" economic dogmatism (Nayar 2023: "New Capitalism Consolidates").

There is merit in Nayar's argument that the decay of the Eastern bloc ended the threat of communism, thus ruining the balance and allowing rampant capitalism to re-emerge. However, this is also the point in which limitations resulting from the lack of conceptual clarity are easily seen. As mentioned earlier, Duncan Bell persuasively shows that it can be said that the very concept of liberal democracy emerged in the context of a global conflict over the proper meaning of democracy. The moniker 'liberal' came to denote a specific type of parliamentary democracies, opposed to both communism and fascism in the interwar period (Bell 2014: 703–704). Contrary to Nayar's argument, it can easily be said that this particular version of liberalism, i.e. liberal democracy became the flagpole for the discourse in which the West is in a struggle to defend democracy against totalitarianism. Although Nayar's argument against the interconnectedness of democracy and capitalism seems relatively sound, the same cannot be said for his overall take on liberal democracy. The relationship between capitalism and liberal democracy, albeit very significant, is not the sufficient discursive tool to offer a comprehensive analysis Nayar proposes. Simply, he never elaborates enough on all the differences and contradictions the concept of liberal democracy entails – capitalism being only one of them.

Ultimately, the most important message Nayar wants to pass is that the most successful period of capitalist development – between 1945 and the advent of neoliberalism – was an anomaly. Neoliberalism, in his view, is a restoration of the original shape of capitalism, the Darwinian capitalism of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His historical account serves to prove that this type of capitalism will necessarily open the possibility for authoritarian regimes in the West. Although this book is written in a remarkably witty style, there is nothing particularly novel about the argument itself. Nayar heavily relies on Barrington Moore's work on the authoritarian origins of modernisation projects, as well as on the role of elites for the process of democratisation (Moore 1993). He bases his conclusion that the current failings of neoliberal capitalism are the direct cause of the rise of the right in the West from Mark Blyth's and Clara Mattei's work on outcomes of austerity and its relationship with fascism (Blyth 2013; Mattei 2022).<sup>7</sup> Overall, it is very important to acknowledge the role of capitalism in the current crisis of liberalism. What is problematic is the pursuit of

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7 Another major influence was Acemoglu, Robinson 2006.

comprehensive historical account in Nayar's argumentation. By reducing his vision to a particular type of liberal democracy, his historical argumentation becomes reductive. Needless to say, Soviet experience and the threat of communism were a major reason to reform or restrain capitalism, but the experience of World War Two, decolonisation, dramatic demographic transitions, technological revolutions, among other things, were so as well. Whereas no one would blame Nayar for not accounting for all these factors, it is worth noticing that acknowledging diverse causes would have enriched his narrative.

Furthermore, Nayar neglects internal processes and developments occurring in Western states after the war that contributed to restraining capitalism and democratising societies. For example, New Deal policies in the US, and their aftermath since 1945, have a very long history of progressive ideologies which predate the communist threat. Exemplary work by Donald Sassoon shows how domestic socialist forces in Western Europe tended to enter a symbiosis with capitalism. Rather than the result of communist threat from the East, Sassoon shows socialists and other leftists discovered that achieving some of their basic demands is compatible with the features of the capitalist nation-states. By becoming active participants in political procedures after 1945, they accepted the state apparatus, which eventually meant that they reconciled with capitalism (Sassoon 1996: xxii, 126). It was *within* the state that the socialist parties pushed for the regulated version of capitalism. So, in exchange for their acceptance of capitalist state and politics, they managed to create the welfare state (Sassoon 1996: 117). Nayar's forceful criticism of neoliberalism is very relevant, but his central point that capitalism was more or less preordained to enter the neoliberal stage, causing further instability and alienation, would require significantly greater analysis, and cannot be extrapolated from his historical evidence. For instance, a more nuanced work by Jürgen Kocka, also critical of neoliberalism, but historically better substantiated, demonstrates that it can hardly be said that there is one direction of capitalist development. Quite the contrary. Capitalism, even in its most unpopular stage, is a remarkably resilient system, capable of adjusting to its shortcomings (Koka 2016: 121–124).

The claim that crisis of liberalism largely overlaps with crisis of democracy and crisis of capitalism is, through different means, explored by both Rose and Nayar. Their ultimate warning is that all these crises will necessarily bring about a rightist resurgence. In that sense, their position is the same – by realising the causes of the crisis, we should contribute to the prevention of gradual deterioration into authoritarianism. While Rose seeks to find the intellectual sources of this deterioration, with limited success, and Nayar tries to shift the attention to neoliberal capitalism, both of them discuss the responsibility of political, intellectual, and economic elites in the perpetuation of the crisis. The question of elites is more or less overshadowed by their attempt to ground their argument in historical narratives. Peter Turchin's *End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration* takes the position of elites as the central factor in explaining all the challenges of liberalism today.

Similar to Rose and Nayar, Turchin tries to establish a comprehensive historical account, ranging from War of Roses, to developments in Imperial China, to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States, in order to justify his claims (Turchin 2023: “Elites, Elite Overproduction, and the Road to Crisis” and “Stepping Back: Lessons from History”). As with the other two books, *End Times* does not fare well with such a wide-sweeping account, and is instead much more useful as the analysis of the current crisis, especially when it comes to the situation in the United States (in this sense, it is quite similar to the overall impression one gets from Rose’s book). As previously stated, this article will not discuss in further detail Turchin’s cliodynamics, i.e. his attempt to use economic and scientific data to establish historical regularities, and then to use this historical knowledge to predict future.

*End Times* is an attempt to prove that the political crises, exemplified in the current one in liberal democracies, are the outcome of a complicated interplay between different elites and increasing inequality (Turchin 2023: “State Breakdown”). Turchin’s book is an exemplary and masterfully well-researched study into the patterns of inequality. His model is particularly useful for its neat definition of growing inequality. Namely, the best indicator for increasing inequality is when the median income becomes smaller than the average income, while the differences between median income and the top 10% earners increase dramatically. Furthermore, elites tend to be “overproduced”, as ever greater number of people compete over corrupt sources of wealth and power. However, once used in his historical analysis, this model necessarily reduces the question of inequality to a rather simple formula, disregarding wider political and social developments, contrary to other authors dealing with similar topics, such as Piketty (Milanović, internet).

Turchin argues that the average income versus median income ratio matters the most in determining the rate of inequality in any given society, deliberately downgrading the importance of other factors (social classes, for example) and implicitly divorcing the question of inequality from political, social, and ideological conditions. His claim is that this formula for ascertaining the rate of inequality is a natural property of the system, extrapolated from formidable empirical data. This allows Turchin to apply this model to almost all Western societies in the previous 200 years (even Qing China). He demonstrates this by arguing that the current median income in the United States directly corresponds to relative earnings of semi-qualified workers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain, or even small landowners in 1830s France or 1850s Russia (Turchin 2023: “Revolutionary Troops”, “The Peasants are Revolting”). These and similar wide-sweeping claims necessarily obfuscate other factors. For example, it can be equally argued that increasing inequality in 1830s France was related to political revisionism after the Restoration, or that 1850s Russian economy was mostly reacting to the consequences of losing the Crimean War, not to mention the fact that Russia was still a feudal society. These factors are at least similarly important as the statistical increase in inequality, and the formation

of a new, proto-capitalist elite, and have equally contributed to the subsequent destabilisation of Russia or France.

Once inequality increases according to this formula, it is accompanied by the competition between contesting elites – the aspiring and counter-elites who emerge from the new discrepancies in earnings and who want their share of power, and the established elites that gradually lose their economic base. Turchin’s model suggests that these two conditions – expanding inequalities and embattled elites – lead to a pre-revolutionary stage, a political disintegration. Very similar to both Nayar and Rose, Turchin applies his historical reasoning to the current crisis. As with Nayar’s book, *End Times* could be read as a justification that the current crisis has a basis in the way in which Western societies have developed. The most valuable part in *End Times* are his thoughts about the current state of Western liberal democracies, especially the United States.<sup>8</sup> In a way, his argument corresponds to Rose’s discussion on Francis. Turchin interprets the current inequality in the United States through its direct victims – the dissatisfied and disillusioned American lower and lower-middle class, who no longer have genuine political representation. He links their predicament to the gradual demise of liberal politics, and the rise of figures such as Donald Trump. It is not only the traditional rightists or conservatives who had ceased to represent their electorate (as Samuel Francis argued). Thomas Piketty and others argued that in all western democracies, leftist and social-democratic parties have become parties of educated elites, whereas the working class and middle class have lost not only their influence, but even a chance to be represented in regular politics (Getting, Martinez-Toledano, Piketty 2022: 40–48). As for Turchin, although he avoids using social classes in his explanations, he is more than successful in depicting the current elites as the main culprits for the social antagonism arising as the result of increasing inequalities. American elites, comprising from CEOs, major investors, corporate lawyers, mainstream media, majority of elected officials, and of course, capitalist magnates, have reduced the American constitutional framework to a plutocracy, using the façade of electoral democracy to preserve and legitimise their power (Turchin 2023: “Why is America a Plutocracy?”). His argument is, thus, similar to Nayar’s, although more substantiated.

The crisis in the United States is, therefore, a conflict between the established, mainstream elites who are defending the primate they had since the 1980s, and the aspiring, perspective ones, i.e. Trumpist Republicans, who are trying to take over their party on ideological grounds. Without much reference to their ideologies, Turchin is trying to say that with this confrontation among the elites and with the increasing inequalities, all the conditions for a pre-revolutionary stage are observable in current American political reality: dysfunctional political system, major intraparty divisions, and the lack of political representations, to say the least. He is, of course, aware that political systems are

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<sup>8</sup> Others have suggested a somewhat similar model for other major countries, like China. See Yang, Novokmet, Milanović, internet.

very resilient and is not trying to argue that America is about to descend into a revolution. Nevertheless, *End Times* have a doomsday-like overtone in its main message – the liberal order is so broken, that if we are to consult history, there is little we could do to avert a major uproar. Except if the elites were to realise their responsibility in perpetuating the crisis. To this end, Turchin wants to nudge the elites into behaving themselves.

The most glaring gap in Turchin's account is his insensitivity to ideological factors. In essence, he is discussing the crisis of a liberal democratic paradigm in the West, without major reflection on the nature of the system that is undergoing this crisis. Despite having a very sophisticated model for interpreting history, and despite saying that the goal of cliodynamics was to integrate all forces of history, Turchin avoids to discuss the interplay between economy, inequality, social elites, on one hand side, and ideology backing it, on the other.<sup>9</sup> As stated in the beginning, the lack of any compelling discussion on the nature of the system in crisis is shared by all three authors discussed here. They all clearly react to major challenges, either economic or intellectual to liberal democracies, and are acutely aware that the crisis will have a detrimental effect on democratic outlooks in Western societies, thus causing the resurgence of adverse rightist forces. Yet, their narratives never engage with the liberal democracy itself. Instead, they converge on some interesting points, in particular on the role of elites in the expected demise of liberal order. But, they never engage in the broader cultural or ideological appeal these elites have in their interpretation of the current crisis. Perhaps the only exception to this is Rose's discussion on the crisis of belonging, seen in the works of Spengler and Evola. But, as stated earlier, the connection between their thoughts and the current radical right is rather dubious, although it is clear that the crisis of belonging and identity issues are important part of anti-liberal arsenal. Therefore, if we were to ask what is "wrong" with liberalism itself, by reading these authors we would either have no answer or we would arrive to the conclusion that nothing is wrong with the ideology itself. The arguments they present seem to be *external* to the worldview they propose to be in crisis.

Rather than the outcome of a relatively dubious connection to past rightist thinkers, or the result of meticulous formula that juxtaposes different types of elites, or even the consequence of rampant neoliberalism, the current crisis, and even more the experience of current crisis is based on historical contingencies relevant in our times. Therefore, the lack of any discussion on the nature of liberalism, in particular the eclectic that informs it, necessarily diminishes the ability of history to inform our present condition.

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9 This omission is visible in other recent works, for example, Thompson 2022 which traces the interconnectedness between the ownership and accessibility to energy sources and the political and economic system over the previous 100 years, while downgrading the importance of ideology, politics, or wider society.

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## U iščekivanju propasti liberalnog poretka: istorizacija krize liberalizma

### Apstrakt

Ovaj pregledni članak analizira prednosti i nedostatke nedavno objavljenih dela Metju Rouza, Petera Turčina i Krišnana Najara o krizi zapadnih liberalnih demokratija i liberalizma. Ispitujući intelektualne i ekonomske uzroke krize, ovi autori pokušavaju da ustanove istorijski model koji bi objasnio trenutnu krizu kroz sveobuhvatno shvatanje razvoja zapadnih društava. Kroz to, oni identifikuju negativnu ulogu elita i rastućih nejednakosti kao glavnih faktora koji kroz istoriju doprinose padu liberalnih vrednosti i ugrožavanju demokratske vladavine prava. Stoga, ove tri knjige predstavljaju upozorenje da će propast liberalnog poretka dovesti do vraćanja desnog autoritarizma. Međutim, sva tri autora izbegavaju raspravu o prirodi liberalizma kao dominantne ideologije Zapada. Ovaj članak kritikuje takave modele, tvrdeći da svaka diskusija o krizi liberalizma koja izbegava rasprave o samom liberalizmu, kao i o liberalnim ideologijama nužno ne uspeva da predoči samo iskustvo te krize. Takođe, ovi modeli ograničavaju korisnost istorije za razumevanje uzroka krize i sprečavanje njenih posledica.

**Ključne reči:** kriza liberalnih demokratija, kapitalizam, elite, nejednakost, desničarski autoritarizam, Turčin, Rouz, Najar.

