

# Peter Thiel on the dangers of progress

The tech billionaire discusses Silicon Valley, Christianity and apocalypse

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You can tell a bit about someone based on their preconceptions about Peter Thiel. Whether the reflexive response to the name is “malign far-Right plutocrat”, “philanthropic saviour of all that is good” or “who?” is a reasonably reliable guide to where that person otherwise sits in the great online psychodrama we now call “the culture wars”.

When he’s not serving as the object of [fantastical](#) (and sometimes [James Bond-themed](#)) progressive demonology, Thiel is a Silicon Valley legend. He co-founded PayPal, and was the first outside investor in Facebook, on whose board he sat from 2005 [until this year](#). He invests in new enterprises via the [Founders Fund](#). He started the big data firm [Palantir](#), which [successfully sued the US Army in 2016](#) over an intelligence analysis system

procurement process, and subsequently [won the contract](#) to deliver that system. He is worth an estimated \$4.9 billion.

He's also, famously (or notoriously, depending on your political priors) interested in culture and politics. As such, in our emerging post-liberal world of lords and princes, Thiel is a prime mover across many fields, and his interests and priorities affect a great many people. And this is perhaps the trait that, above all else, invites parallels to premodern figures such as Lorenzo De' Medici, the Florentine statesman and banker who was also his era's foremost patron of the arts.

For Thiel, this extends to personal as well as financial interventions, and I met him in such a context. We were both on the teaching faculty for a week-long [seminar](#) at Stanford in Palo Alto, with the magnificent title "The Machine Has No Tradition: a seminar on technology, revolution and apocalypse". We sat down together after a day spent with Stanford grad students, Silicon Valley whizzkids and young DC politicians, wrestling with the question of what technology *is*. Thiel had just led a four-hour session on the French thinker René Girard.

The grand themes of technology, revolution and apocalypse hung in the air. So, too, did the parallel facts of my having enough common intellectual preoccupations with Thiel to land us

both on the same academic roster, while remaining separated from him by an incommensurably vast power asymmetry. Against that backdrop, I wanted to understand the interests and priorities of this sociopolitical titan, on his own terms. More plainly: how does Peter Thiel view his own project?

The overarching answer seems to be: real as opposed to illusory progress. Post-liberal thinkers such as Patrick Deneen, author of the bestselling 2018 book [\*Why Liberalism Failed\*](#), argue that many contemporary social ills are an effect of the way the liberal project cannibalises social goods, such as family life or religious faith, in order to pursue narrow metrics such as (on the Left) personal freedom or (on the Right) economic growth. Thiel sees many of the same ills as Deneen, but offers a strikingly different framing: we're consuming ourselves not because the fixation on progress is inevitably self-destructive beyond a certain threshold, but because material progress has objectively stalled while we remain collectively in denial about this fact.

In Thiel's view, this has been the case since the mid-20th century, except in digital technologies. "We've had continued progress in the world of computers, bits, internet, mobile internet, but it's a narrow zone of progress. And it's been more interior, atomising and inward-focused." Over the same period, he tells me,

“there’s been limited progress in the world of atoms”.

Thiel characterises this stagnation as a long, slow victory of the [Club of Rome](#), a nonprofit founded in 1968 to drive political change premised on the belief that infinite growth is impossible. As Thiel sees it, this tacit postwar abandonment of the growth aspiration has resulted in “something like a societal and cultural lockdown; not just the last two years but in many ways the last 40 or 50”. There’s “a cultural version, a demographic version, and a technological version of this stagnant or decadent society,” he suggests. And the upshot of this paralysis has been “a world of technological stagnation and demographic collapse”, along with “sclerosis in government and banal repetition in culture”.

He’s been making the case for real-terms tech stagnation for 15 years now, he tells me, against a mainstream Left and Right that doesn’t want to know: “it was always striking how much it went against the stated ideology of the regime.” Perpetuating the fantasy of progress, against a backdrop of its actual stagnation, is at the heart of delusions on both Left and Right, he argues: “the Silicon Valley liberals don’t like it, because they think they’re driving this great engine of progress”, while social conservatives “have conceded the ground to the liberals, because they believe the Left-wing propaganda about

how much science and technology are progressing”. And against this backdrop of cross-party denial, institutions and the wider culture are increasingly shaped by real-terms stagnation.

In his view, much of what passes for “progress” is in truth more like “distraction”. As he puts it, “the iPhone that distracts us from our environment also distracts us from the ways our environment is unchanging and static.” And in this culture, economy and politics of chronic self-deception, as Thiel sees it, we tell ourselves that we’re advancing because “grandma gets an iPhone with a smooth surface,” but meanwhile she “gets to eat cat food because food prices have gone up.”

In this context, Thiel argues, much of what passes as “progress” in economic terms is actually an accounting trick. For example, much of what looks like GDP growth since the Fifties was simply a matter of changing how we measured the value bundled up in family life. If, he points out, “you shift an economy from a single-income household with a homemaker to one with two breadwinners and a third person who’s a child-carer, statistically you have three jobs instead of one and therefore you have more GDP, and you will exaggerate the amount of progress that’s happened”.

That is: if what you're calling "progress" is not so much a change in the activities taking place, but rather a change in how you're measuring those activities, in what sense has anything really changed, let alone improved? After all, he points out, between 1880 and 1960 automation so far reduced working hours that analysts predicted by the year 2000 the average family would subsist happily on the wage of one worker putting in seven hours a day, four days a week, with 13 weeks' paid holiday. But then "it somehow went really into reverse".

Since then, many goods once common to America's middle class have been cannibalised to preserve the illusion of progress. "We are much less of a middle-class society," he points out, in the sense of "people who think their children will do better than themselves". And this growing scarcity, coupled with denial of that scarcity, has profoundly corrupted once-trusted institutions. Even the Club of Rome was, in his view, "not pessimistic enough about how badly a zero-growth world would work, and how much it would derange our institutions". For most of our institutions "depend on growth; and when the growth stops, they lie and they become sociopathic".

In this context, what Thiel dismissively refers to as "the woke religion" is less a driving force in contemporary politics than part of this vast collective displacement activity. Notably, it's

often a delivery mechanism for resource competition, for example in universities where student numbers are ever-rising even as paid positions shrink, a pinch that “brings out the worst in people”. So much of what looks like an unhinged new ideology is actually the brutal office politics pursued by too many academics competing for too few paid positions? “Yes,” he says, “and maybe there’s some way to get people to be nicer to one another in a world of limited resources. But we never seem to be even able to talk about that.”

If, he suggests, it were more obvious to people that we now live in a stagnant world, more might be said and done to address it. But the key reason this isn’t happening is “that we’ve been distracted from the lack of progress” by “the shift from exteriority, from measurable things” such as “faster speeds, supersonic airplanes or longer life expectancies” and re-oriented on “the interior world of yoga, meditation, psychology, parapsychology, psychopharmacology, psychedelic drugs, video games, the internet et cetera”.

The governing thread in Thiel’s interventions in culture and politics, then, seems to be re-orienting the wider direction of travel away from what he views as displacement activities, back toward more concrete forms of progress of the sort that might translate into a return to this kind of widespread optimism. This includes a

streak of political philanthropy that has recently leaned toward supporting candidates who campaign on the material interests of America's languishing middle class.

Blake Masters, who co-wrote Thiel's bestseller *Zero to One*, is now running for the Senate in Arizona with Thiel's support; [recent polling](#) has Masters as the frontrunner in the Republican primary. Another politician with Thiel support is *Hillbilly Elegy* author JD Vance, who received a \$10m Thiel donation that some [credit](#) with bumping Vance to victory in May's primary for the US Senate in Ohio. Both Masters and Vance make the increasingly bleak state of America's once thriving and prosperous middle class a central part of their campaigning platform. One Masters [campaigning video](#) takes as its central premise the argument that it should be possible to support a family on a single income — something that, for a growing swathe of the middle sort, hasn't been the case for decades.

Importantly, though, he doesn't see restoring middle-class aspiration as a matter of returning to the past, but of seeking new real-world advances in science and technology. Along with Thiel's own investments, which include many [futuristic projects](#) such as biotech and space exploration, the principal vehicle for his efforts to drive this change is the nonprofit [Thiel Foundation](#), which promotes science and innovation. Its programmes include the Thiel



Fellowship, which gives 20-30 young people aged 22 or under \$100,000 each, every year, to drop out of college and work on an urgent idea. Graduates include Austin Russell, who founded [Luminar](#) and is the world's youngest self-made billionaire, and Vitalik Buterin, who co-founded the cryptocurrency [Ethereum](#).

Those among us temperamentally sceptical of never-ending progress and growth may be shifting nervously in our seats by this point. Thiel seems unfazed by the idea that technology may infringe on what's "natural". How do we prevent runaway tech changes dragging us into some monstrously inhuman dystopia? Can we retain our humanity, I ask Thiel, in the context of just how transformative technology can be?

He seems to view this as a largely academic question, and not really in keeping with his understanding of Christian civilisation as fundamentally oriented toward the future. "I think of Christianity as deeply historical. Some sense of a certain type of progress of history is a deep part of Christianity." And from this perspective, the notion that there exists an unchanging human nature doesn't really fit with the Christian outlook, but belongs — as he puts it — more "in the classical than the Christian tradition".

“The word ‘nature’ does not occur once in the Old Testament,” he tells me, while “the concept of ‘nature’ as something that’s eternal and unchanging” isn’t a Christian one either. “It seems to me that the Christian concepts are more things like grace or original sin.” From this perspective, Thiel argues, the problem with transhumanism isn’t that it seeks to remake humanity, but that it isn’t ambitious enough in this regard: “the Christian critique of transhumanism should be that it’s not radical enough, because it’s only seeking to transform our bodies and not our souls.” It appears, in other words, that while Thiel is unflinchingly realistic about what’s immediately achievable, he doesn’t see any given or self-evident limits to what we could set our sights on.

What if the Club of Rome is right, though, and we really have reached the limits to material growth? I put to him for a number of reasons — culturally and materially — it seems more than possible that we’ve irretrievably passed the point of Peak Progress. If this is so, he tells me, the first response should be frank realism. We should, he suggests, “at least be able to talk about it, and figure out ways to make our society work in a low-growth world”. But he sees this attitude less as realism than a cop-out: “I think that sounds like a lazy excuse of people who don’t want to work very hard. It sounds too much like an excuse.” Far from being a matter of humans bumping up against natural limits,

he argues, “I want to blame it on cultural changes, rather than on us running out of ideas”.

What, then, does he see as driving the cultural side of stagnation? Thiel thinks the decline of Christianity is a major factor. To him “a more naturally Christian world” was “an expanding world, a progressing world” that hit its apogee in late Victorian Britain. “It felt very expansive, both in terms of the literal empire and also in terms of the progress of knowledge, of science, of technology, and somehow that was naturally consonant with a certain Christian eschatology — a Christian vision of history. Then somehow the stagnant ecological world that we’re in is one in which there’s been a collapse of religious belief. I want to say they’re somehow sociologically linked.”

I put it to him that many historians date the slow implosion of Christianity from the emergence of just the kind of scientific enquiry Thiel wants to encourage in the name of a Christian-inflected tech progressivism. Was it ever plausible, I ask him, that we could hold the worlds of faith and of science and technology in equilibrium? He appears to view this, once again, as a largely irrelevant academic question; the real implosion of mass religiosity in Britain, he suggests, coincided with the end of the British Empire.

“If you had an expansive view and you were going to make disciples of all nations, and send missionaries to the world, and somehow that project no longer made sense, then would this somehow also lead to a collapse within your own society. I think my sense is that Britain was still very Christian in the Fifties, then it had somehow completely collapsed by 1980. So it maps onto the end of colonisation.”

He sees a parallel process at work in the stalling and retreat of American empire: “I would map America in 2000 onto Britain in 1950, and America in 2020 onto somewhere like Britain in 1975 or 1980, where somehow the expansionary part of America has very much faded.” America has abandoned its mission of imperial evangelism: “in 1999 or 2005 there was still this sense that you were proselytising the world, and I think that has strangely collapsed. I’m not sure what the causation is, but there’s some way that the growth of Christianity was linked to it and when it stops expanding it’s in very serious trouble.”

What’s missing from the world now is a clear vision of the future — or even any vision. Reviving Christian faith might help, he thinks: “if we were more Christian, we would also have more hope for the future, and if we’re less Christian we’re going to have less hope. And there’s probably less action.” Failing this, any vision of the future at all would help, especially

if it's an optimistic one. Though he doesn't particularly like science fiction, he says, more upbeat stories on this front might help: "If one could produce science fiction that were less uniformly bleak that might help on a literary level."

Failing other options, Thiel thinks even bleak or apocalyptic visions are better than no vision at all. The picture of European climate catastrophe associated with Greta Thunberg is, as he sees it, one of only three realistic European futures; the other two are "Islamic sharia law", and "Chinese Communist AI". He views the social-democratic models typical of contemporary European politics as variations on the theme of stagnation: "a sort of eternal Groundhog Day". And while Greta's vision is "in some ways too apocalyptic, in some ways not apocalyptic enough", it is at least "a very concrete picture", and represents the least worst of the three alternatives to stagnation.

Failing a mass revival of Christianity, what political or material levers does Thiel think we should pull to restart some kind of future? "Zoning laws and the FDA," he tells me. One of the biggest issues is housing, which he notes "is linked to family formation" — and, he suggests, another field in which scarcity and resource competition is fanning the flames of political derangement. "Real estate prices doubled and people got a lot crazier." Fixing

this would be a good route into addressing our sclerosis, because “it’s not pure technology. You’d think it would be easy to change the zoning laws, but in practice it’s extremely hard to do.”

As for the FDA, Thiel points out that even the pessimists in the Club of Rome thought healthcare could go on advancing. And again, as with zoning laws, he argues that if we’re stuck on this front it’s not because we’re running out of resources. “I’ve done some investing in biotech over the last 15-20 years. It’s very strange; my sense for the science is that we could be making a lot more progress, and then in practice it’s extraordinarily difficult because of regulatory constraints and other things. So biotech is an area where I think it’s not quite resource-constraints; my read on it is that’s more cultural than natural. Again: we don’t have to talk about limitless human life, but just: can we have a cure for dementia? Is that absolutely impossible? I would claim we don’t know enough about science to know that’s absolutely impossible.”

He acknowledges that there are implicit risks in forging ahead with new discoveries. “I think there are dangers to science and technology, but there are also great dangers in stagnation,” he tells me. In his view, though, the only way out is through: the fantasy of returning to some form of vanished past is just that, a fantasy. “We

can't go back to the Paleolithic era, we can't go back to an agrarian economy, we can't even go back to a 19th century industrial economy. And then it seems to me that we don't know how to make a zero-growth society work."

In that context, we need to base our vision of the future on something: "And maybe science and technology aren't that much, but I would say if we stop believing in the teleology of science and technology it's not that we go back to some Thomistic or medieval concept of teleology. We become fully epicurean."

Is Thiel an uncompromising materialist and realist, or a visionary idealist? It's hard to say, and what I say would make little difference anyway. "Speaking truth to power" has always been, ambivalently at least, a fantasy of print-era writers; less acknowledged, though, is the fact that such pugnacious independence was always premised on the writers themselves being able to make a living direct from a paying audience. And in the digital era of information super-abundance and flimsy copyright, this is a luxury available to an ever-shrinking roster.

In almost all other contexts, the lot of writers is once again shaped by the intellectual and political preoccupations of the 21st century's lords and princes. It would be absurd to pretend that I could force an account of the Thiel worldview according to the print-era fantasies of

writerly independence, or even to hold him to some “objective” discursive standard (a conceit which all sides treat in any case as increasingly outmoded). Rather, like Lorenzo de’ Medici, Thiel reorders the cultural world around himself, like iron filings responding to magnetism.

And in this, if little else, he represents a return to tradition. Those still committed to the democratic vision of politics may be tempted to treat figures such as Soros or Thiel as exemplars of dangerously untrammelled power, exerting a malign influence over a political process otherwise characterised by democratic checks and balances. But I’ve come to think that this has it backwards. To my eye, Peter Thiel isn’t an aberration in an otherwise seamless march of democratic progress, but a reversion to the historic norm. Or to put it another way: I’m coming to suspect the democratic era was a flash in the pan, and what’s now emerging is a 21st century variation on an ancient form of power, more monarchic or feudal in character than “populist”, let alone democratic.

And as I’ve argued, the alternative to such figures may not be democracy but governance by a decentralised post-democratic swarm (analogous, perhaps, to what Thiel calls “Chinese Communist AI”). Given these options, we may yet conclude that the political return of human lords and princes — however unnervingly



untrammelled their power, or remorselessly tech-optimist their worldview — is far from the worst option currently on the table. The premodern world of aristocratic patronage was far from being a cultural desert, an achievement that contrasts sharply with the [militantly anti-aesthetic \(and anti-human\)](#) character of post-democratic swarm politics. If I'm right about the prognosis for liberal democracy in the digital age, the available options for our future may be culturally vibrant human-led neo-feudalism, or aggressively anti-cultural swarm governance. And in this case, even those of us who mourn the passing of the liberal world may yet find ourselves, however ambivalently, on the side of Caesar.