Peter Thiel's philosophy of stagnation and apocalypse

Two seemingly disparate obsessions—technological decline and religious eschatology—form the unified core of Peter Thiel's worldview. His thinking draws heavily from his Stanford mentor René Girard to argue that the West's loss of dynamism since the 1970s and its potential for apocalyptic violence are not separate problems but manifestations of the same underlying crisis: the unraveling of the cultural and spiritual foundations that once channeled human mimetic rivalry into productive ends.

"We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters"

This famous line, which originated in the 2011 Founders Fund manifesto "What Happened to the Future?", encapsulates Thiel's core stagnation thesis. In his telling, genuine progress—moving from **0 to 1**—largely ceased around 1973, replaced by mere iteration. "I date this era of relative stagnation and slowed progress all the way back to the 1970s," he told Eric Weinstein on The Portal podcast. "It's been close to half a century that we've been in this era of seriously slowed progress."

The exception proves the rule. Computers and software represent dramatic innovation, but Thiel frames this success as masking a broader failure: "We live in a world where we've been working on the Star Trek computer in Silicon Valley, but we don't have anything else from Star Trek. We don't have the warp drive, we don't have the transporter." In a characteristically cutting formulation from MIT Technology Review: "You have as much computing power in your iPhone as was available at the time of the Apollo missions. But what is it being used for? It's being used to throw angry birds at pigs."

His evidence for stagnation spans sectors. Transportation speeds have actually reversed—"with the retirement of the Concorde, for the first time in human history time to cross the Atlantic went up, not down." Nixon's 1971 War on Cancer failed. Nuclear engineering became a career dead end. The Empire State Building was built in 15 months in 1932; today such projects seem impossible. "We have **100 times as many scientists** as we did in 1920," he observes. "If there's less rapid progress now than in 1920 then the productivity per scientist is perhaps less than 1% of what it was."

The 1969 inflection point: from moonshot to Woodstock

Thiel identifies a precise historical turning point: "I'd say 1968, the narrative progress seemed intact. By '73, it was somehow over. So somewhere in that five-year period." His memorable formulation captures the cultural shift: "Men reached the moon in July 1969, and Woodstock began three weeks later. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this was when the hippies took over the country, and when the true cultural war over Progress was lost."

Multiple causes converge in his analysis. Regulatory burden plays a central role: “We lived in a world in which **bits were unregulated and atoms were regulated**. If you are starting a computer software company, that costs maybe $100,000; to get a new drug through the FDA, maybe on the order of a billion dollars.” But deeper cultural transformation matters more. Government competence collapsed: “In the 1930s and 1940s you had a degree of technocratic competence that was quite significant. Today, a letter from Einstein would get lost in the White House mail room. The Manhattan Project would be unthinkable.”

A self-reinforcing failure dynamic took hold: “When you have a history of failure, that becomes discouraging and so failure begets failure. No halfway sane parent would encourage their kids to study nuclear engineering today, whereas there are a lot of people going into software.” The specialized experts who should sound alarms instead protect their fiefdoms: “The string theorists talking about how great string theory is, the cancer researchers talking about how they’re just about to cure cancer... And then if you were to say that all these fields, not much is happening, people just don’t have the authority for this.”

Indefinite optimism and the loss of concrete vision

In *Zero to One*, Thiel introduces his influential taxonomy of worldviews. “**Definite optimism**”—believing the future will be better and having concrete plans to make it so—characterized the West “from the 17th century through the 1950s and ’60s.” Scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs “made the world richer, healthier, and more long-lived than previously imaginable.”

This gave way to “**indefinite optimism**”: believing the future will be better “but he doesn’t know how exactly, so he won’t make any specific plans. He expects to profit from the future but sees no reason to design it concretely.” The consequences are devastating: “Instead of working for years to build a new product, indefinite optimists rearrange already-invented ones. Bankers make money by rearranging the capital structures of already existing companies. Lawyers resolve disputes over old things.”

His cultural critique is sweeping. “Robert Moses, the great builder of New York City in the 1950s and 1960s, or Oscar Niemeyer, the great architect of Brasilia, belong to a past when people still had concrete ideas about the future. Voters today prefer Victorian houses. Science fiction has collapsed as a literary genre.” The Lean Startup methodology itself reflects the problem: “Iteration without a bold plan won’t take you from 0 to 1. You could build the best version of an app that lets people order toilet paper from their iPhone.”

The remedy requires nothing less than civilizational renewal: “**We have to find our way back to a definite future, and the Western world needs nothing short of a cultural revolution to do it.**”

René Girard’s shadow over Silicon Valley

Thiel’s economic analysis connects to something stranger: the mimetic theory of French anthropologist René Girard, his professor at Stanford. “There was almost a cult-like element

where you have these people who were followers of Girard," Thiel told Weinstein, "and it was a sense that we had figured out the truth about the world in a way that nobody else did." He describes himself as a "hardcore, unreconstructed Girardian."

The theory's core holds that human desire is fundamentally **imitative**. "It was sort of this theory of human psychology as deeply mimetic where you copy other people… You imitate people but that's how you learn to speak as a child. You copy your parents' language, but then you also imitate desire." This extends into acquisitive realms—"keeping up with the Joneses"—pushing people into escalating rivalry with no instinctual brakes.

Thiel applies this directly to business. In *Zero to One*: "All happy companies are different: each one earns a monopoly by solving a unique problem. All failed companies are the same: they failed to escape competition." **Competition is destructive** because it triggers mimetic escalation: "Inside a firm, people become obsessed with their competitors for career advancement. Then the firms themselves become obsessed with their competitors in the marketplace. Amid all the human drama, people lose sight of what matters and focus on their rivals instead."

He credits Girard with inspiring his career switch from law to entrepreneurship, and famously invested $500,000 in Facebook because he "saw Professor Girard's theories being validated in the concept of social media." At PayPal, he structured roles to prevent mimetic conflict: "I noticed how unclear job responsibilities were arousing internal rivalries and infighting among my employees. Therefore, using another Girardian insight, the power of distinctions and prohibitions, I made employees responsible for one thing, and one thing only."

The scapegoat and the founding murder

Girard's darker insight concerns how societies managed mimetic violence historically. In "The Straussian Moment," Thiel explains: "The war of all against all culminates not in a social contract but in a **war of all against one**, as the same mimetic forces gradually drive the combatants to gang up on one particular person." This scapegoat's death "helps to unite the community and bring about a limited peace for the survivors."

This founding murder becomes sacred: "That murder is the secret origin of all religious and political institutions, and is remembered and transfigured in the form of myth. The scapegoat, perceived as the primal source of conflict and disorder, had to die for there to be peace. By violence, violence was brought to an end and society was born."

The mechanism requires concealment. "The scapegoat really is not as guilty as the persecuting community claims," but the system only functions when participants believe otherwise. Thiel uses a striking metaphor from Girard: "The sacred is like phlogiston and violence is like oxygen, but it only works in a world where it's misunderstood."

Christianity, for Girard and Thiel, **reveals** this mechanism and thereby breaks it. "We now live in a world where the cat is out of the bag, at least to the extent that we know that the scapegoat really is not as guilty as the persecuting community claims. Because the smooth

functioning of human culture depended on a lack of understanding of this truth of human culture, the archaic rituals will no longer work for the modern world." This creates modern civilization's central problem: old violence-containing mechanisms have failed, but nothing adequate has replaced them.

The apocalyptic dimension of technology

Here Thiel's two obsessions converge. In his 2024 Hoover Institution interview, he stated bluntly: "The apocalyptic prophecies are just a prediction of what humans are likely to do. In a world in which they have ever more powerful technologies, in which there are no sacred limits on the use of these technologies, in which human nature has maybe not gotten worse, but has not gotten better."

The modern world "contains a powerfully apocalyptic dimension" because technological power grows while traditional restraints dissolve. "Beginning with the Great War in 1914, and accelerating after 1945, there has re-emerged an apocalyptic dimension to the modern world," he wrote in "The Optimistic Thought Experiment." "In a strange way, however, this apocalyptic dimension has arisen from the very place that was meant to liberate us from antediluvian fears."

Mimetic dynamics compound the danger: "Nuclear weapons pose a horrific dilemma, but one could (just barely) imagine a nuclear standoff in which a handful of states remain locked in a cold war. But what if mimesis drives others to try and acquire these same weapons for the mimetic prestige they confer?" The technological situation contains "a powerful escalatory dynamic."

His assessment of contemporary political discourse is damning: "One may define a 'liberal' as someone who knows nothing of the past and of this history of violence, and still holds to the Enlightenment view of the natural goodness of humanity. And one may define a 'conservative' as someone who knows nothing of the future and of the global world that is destined to be, and therefore still believes that the nation-state or other institutions rooted in sacred violence can contain unlimited human violence."

Between Armageddon and Antichrist

Thiel frames the contemporary predicament with biblical precision. "I would always maybe go back to the apocalyptic specter, would be Antichrist or Armageddon," he told Hoover's Peter Robinson. "There is a lot in this runaway science technology that's pushing us towards something like Armageddon. And then the natural pushback on this is, we will avoid Armageddon by having a one world state that has real teeth, real power. And the biblical term for that is the **Antichrist**."

The Antichrist, in Thiel's reading, represents totalitarian global governance promising safety from technological apocalypse. "My speculative thesis is that if the Antichrist were to come to power, it would be by talking about Armageddon all the time… The slogan of the Antichrist is peace and safety, which is nothing wrong with peace and safety. But you have to sort of

imagine that it resonates very differently in a world where the stakes are so absolute, where the alternative to peace and safety is Armageddon."

He draws on Carl Schmitt's vision: "The sinister magician recreates the world, changes the face of the earth, and subdues nature. Nature serves him; for what purpose is a matter of indifference—for any satisfaction of artificial needs, for ease and comfort." Critically, "everyone is worried about the Scylla of Armageddon. We're not worried enough about the Charybdis of one world government."

The Antichrist can be "a type, a system, a person." The United States itself "is a natural candidate for both" the restraining force and the Antichrist: "The US is ground zero of globalization and it's ground zero of the resistance to bad globalization, we're both."

The narrow path and human agency

Despite apocalyptic imagery, Thiel resists fatalism. "I don't think the future is this fixed thing that just exists," he told Tyler Cowen. "I don't think there's something automatic about the great stagnation ending or not ending. I always believe in human agency and so I think it matters a great deal whether people end it or not."

His vision charts between extremes: "The Christian intuition I have is, I don't want Antichrist, I don't want Armageddon. I would like to find some narrow path between these two where we can avoid both." This requires active engagement, not withdrawal. Against Rod Dreher's "Benedict Option" of retreat into religious communities, Thiel is sharp: "I don't want to argue with him on the level of personal sanctification or people saving their souls. My political, social intuition is that it's the height of your responsibility because that is just, in effect, hitting the accelerator towards the Antichrist, Armageddon."

Progress and faith are linked in his sociology: "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." The current "stagnant ecological world" correlates with "a collapse of religious belief. I want to say they're somehow sociologically linked."

Conclusion: The integrated vision

Peter Thiel's worldview defies conventional categories. His technological pessimism connects to religious eschatology through Girardian anthropology: both stagnation and apocalyptic risk stem from the breakdown of cultural mechanisms that once channeled mimetic human nature into productive rather than destructive competition.

The statesman's duty, in Thiel's framing, requires unusual wisdom: "The Christian statesman or stateswoman knows that the modern age will not be permanent, and ultimately will give way to something very different. One must never forget that one day all will be revealed, that all injustices will be exposed, and that those who perpetrated them will be held to account. And so, in determining the correct mixture of violence and peace, the Christian statesman or

stateswoman would be wise, in every close case, to side with peace."

His call to action remains urgent: "Now is such a moment. If we don't take charge and usher in the future—if you don't take charge of your life—there is the sense that no one else will." The race between politics and technology continues. "The future will be much better or much worse, but the question of the future remains very open indeed."

Primary sources consulted: "The Straussian Moment" (2007); "The Optimistic Thought Experiment" (2008); "The Education of a Libertarian" (2009); "The End of the Future" (2011); *Zero to One* (2014); The Portal podcast with Eric Weinstein (2019); Conversations with Tyler (2015, 2024); Uncommon Knowledge/Hoover Institution (2024); UnHerd interview (2022); MIT Technology Review (2014); Founders Fund manifesto (2011).