



## PART ONE: DECADENCE

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Many of Tonsor's lectures on the problem of decadence in Western intellectual history had remained unpublished until now; the three included in this section appear in print for the first time. These lectures date from the 1970s and 1980s and reflect Tonsor's intense concern with the decline of traditional ideas and culture and its characterization. Planned as a book, Tonsor's papers at the Hoover Institution contain his completed series of lectures on decadence in Western culture.





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## Decadence Past and Present

Most bums and alcoholics living in cardboard boxes and sleeping atop fair-conditioning grates know that something has gone wrong in their lives. One often encounters these lost souls, even in Ann Arbor. If questioned most of them will insist that their plight is not of their own making; that their lives are the fruits of circumstance; that life has given them less than was their due; that they are more sinned against than sinning, and that were the world different they would be different. In their more candid and saner moments they admit their guilt and confess the personal inadequacies that have brought them to their low estate. They are, in fact, decadents who have lost a sense of form, who are unable to make demands of themselves, who are unable to live up to commitments, whose lives are dominated by a sense of drift and worthlessness, seeking in intoxication the sense of well-being that ordinary lives in ordinary circumstances so rarely produce.

Not many of these lost souls would argue that they are decadent and living in a decadent era. And yet in microcosm their problems are the same as those of cultures in macrocosm—cultures that have lost their form and *raison d'être*. It is well to remember this parallel between the personal and the social, the microcosm and the macrocosm. There is a close connection, though any discussion of decadence is far more complicated than this simple analysis would indicate.

We must remember in the first place that historical pessimism is quite different from decadence. The notion of decadence is a recent one, contemporaneous in origin with the notion of progress. Both decadence and progress are typical manifestations of “de-sacralized time.” That is to say, in general, up to the eighteenth century historical pessimism rather than the notion of historical decadence was the commonplace conception. The cycle of the life of man was an analogue of the historical cycle. It was one of birth, growth, maturity, old age and decay, and finally death. As with the

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vegetative cycle, life could be renewed and growth restored. In history, the restoration of time, the abolition of time's erosion, was achieved by a repetition of the cosmogonic act; the repetition of the myth of creation. The remedy for historical decay was essentially religious and mythical. This conception of the periodic restoration of time lies behind pagan, non-Christian notions of historical restoration.

The demythologized Hebrew and Christian conception of history turned away from the repetition of the cosmogonic act to the idea of apocalypse and eschatology. According to this theory, the present order of history is abolished and a new creation is substituted for it. The effects of man's fall in the Garden of Eden and all the cosmic consequences that flow from it are finally overcome and abolished, and a new heaven and a new earth are substituted at the end of time for the present one, which has been disordered and decayed by sin. Both pagan and Judeo-Christian conceptions of historical pessimism are thus based on the notion of the progressive, spontaneous erosion of time. The solution, in both cases, is an essentially religious one. Thus, the healing and salvation of the individual is the consequence of an act of conversion; the appropriation of something that happens outside the self and the turning of the self to a source of strength and power that resides elsewhere. Personal soteriologies, theories of salvation, are not in fact very different from historical soteriologies, which call for a transformation of history.

In the eighteenth century, with the general demystification and secularization of thought, these religious solutions to the problem of the restoration of time and history seemed to the European intellectual elite no longer valid. Time's decay came to be thought of as irremediable and determined, just as the notion of progressive development seemed, on the other hand, inevitable. Both appeared as processes internal to or immanent in history and time and not external to them. The gods (or God) were able to restore the sacral time of the premodern world. The only restoration of time possible in the decadent history of the modern age is, at best, a turn of the cycle, endlessly and meaninglessly repeated.

Thus, the history of desacralized time is beyond any human act aimed at restoration. It is a determined declension about which nothing can be done. The heroic man, as in Spengler's theory, can only stand in place and watch the world crumble about him. Without modernity and desacralized time there could be no conception of decadence.

The second major element in the development of theories of decadence is the classical Greco-Roman paradigm. Few theories of decadence advanced in the last three centuries do not argue analogically from classical Greco-Roman experience to the contemporary experience of Western civilization. Indeed, most theories of decadence assume an exact parallel be-

tween the breakdown of classical civilization and the supposed decadence of the West. This parallel is most clear in the decay of republican political institutions, the coming of the Caesars, and the appearance of world empire. These events in the political sphere, it is usually argued, are accompanied by the decay of religion, the appearance of luxury, the growth of immorality, and the loss of form. Creativity slackens and art and literature decline. It is important to assert here that without the classical model there could and would be no clearly argued and articulated theory of decadence. It is the classical pattern of decay as applied to contemporary events which provides the model for decadence, and this classical model is in turn attached to the idea of desacralized time and a disbelief in the possibility of regeneration.

We should note that the theorists of decadence were reading time both backward and forward; moving from the present moment into the past and from the past into the present moment. The preoccupation with decadence from the second half of the eighteenth century to the present time was possible only because the experience of the classical world threw some doubt on the idea of progress that became so marked in the eighteenth century. The great debate as to the reality of progress could take place only in terms of the experience of classical history, and this in turn was possible only because of the intense study of classical history that characterized modern times. By the end of the eighteenth century there were more or less complete and coherent accounts of the histories of classical Greece and Rome, and these accounts had become the basis for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political theory and statecraft.

One of the most characteristic aspects of all decadence theory is the presence of large amounts of historical guilt. Societies do not think of themselves as decadent until they first feel that they have in some sense fallen short either of the virtues of their ancestors or the demands of the present time. This guilt is not metaphysical—societies that feel themselves decadent rarely say that they have sinned against God; rather, they say that they have succumbed to the spirit of the times. While confession, forgiveness, and salvation is the remedy for sin against God, in a world in which God is dead, or at least religion is dead, there is no remedy. Only irremediable guilt remains.

This guilt often derives from what Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* calls “boundary transgression.” Crossing a behavioral line from licit to taboo and forbidden behavior, crossing the line dividing consumption based upon need to consumption that is excessive, transgressions against racial or class boundaries—all are forms of boundary transgression that result in guilt and feelings of decadence. Thus, the concept of “form” is especially important to nearly all decadence theory. By “form” is most of-

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ten meant lifestyle. In many instances the decay of aristocratic form and style is seen as a sign of decadence. Those who seek their pleasures among the deracinated denizens of bohemia—those classless members of the demi-monde—are viewed as decadent. When a whole society goes slumming it is viewed as being decadent. Just so, when intellectual and artistic standards are set not by an intellectual elite, conscious of its duty and dedicated to high culture, but by the riff-raff, the rock musicians, the jugglers and clowns, the thieves and murderers, men say something is wrong. The elite has abandoned its role of leadership. It is of this phenomenon that Arnold Toynbee speaks when he writes of “the abdication of the creative minority.” It is this confusion of the orders, society seen not as an ordered structure but as a perennial saturnalia, a feast of fools, that is the ultimate boundary transgression and the ultimate loss of form.

Closely associated with the idea of “boundary transgression” in decadence theory is the idea that luxury dissolves, enervates, and makes a society effeminate. The military virtues decay. Men retreat from the public realm of civic obligation and service into a private realm of pleasure and enjoyment. The development of widespread luxury in a society is thought to parallel the development of tyrannical political forms. Tyrants encourage the development of luxury because they know that luxury leads to the decay of civic virtue. Luxury, it is thought, makes possible the excesses characteristic of the decadent society.

While boundary transgression in all its forms provides some of the most characteristic symptoms of decadence, the decline of religious belief and practice is seen as one of its chief causes. In ancient society the gods lost their compelling power in the affairs of human society. Philosophy, unbelief, and the appearance of new and exotic sects replaced the old religion. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society the belief in and practice of Christianity was abandoned by the intellectual elite. As Dostoyevsky observed, “If God is dead, everything is permitted.” The only sources of human motivation now became the will to power and the will to pleasure. From de Sade to Nietzsche the message remains the same. However, when society is dissolved into a mass of competing egos and any principle of transcendent order disappears, there is no basis for an ordered civic life. Consensus as to the desired goals of society disappear, and a dictator or authoritarian government must impose an order from the outside. In creative, purposeful societies the order of political life derives from a consensus in values and an agreement on order arrived at internally in the society. Thus, a breakdown of the social order is the consequence of an inordinate individualism motivated by the quest for power and pleasure.

You will note something about decadence theories. Societies do not decay and fall into ruin because of what happens to them from the outside,

but rather as the result of an internal process. It is not foreign invasions which cause decadence but rather decadence which makes foreign invasion possible. France in 1870 first becomes decadent and then is defeated by the Germans. Internal revolution and external threat are both viewed as the consequence of decadence. The fact is that most decadence theorists see barbarian invaders as a source of rejuvenation for a tired and decadent society. Consequently, the theory explained the rejuvenation of Western society and the creativity of the Middle Ages as a consequence of the barbarian invasions, and in the nineteenth century the Slavs, particularly the Russians, were supposed to perform the same service for the Western Europeans. For Spengler and Toynbee, the absence of a barbarian people capable of rejuvenating and restoring Western Europe is a problem. The theory is that fresh blood, a fresh infusion of creative vigor, will freshen the tired old society.

One of the most important evidences of social decadence is the breakdown of traditional political forms, either aristocracy or republicanism, and the appearance of Caesarism. This political revolution, which culminates in tyranny and imperialism, is the final stage in the cycle of constitutions and is the consequence of the decay of aristocratic forms and republican virtue. It transforms the army from a citizen body to a professional army of paid mercenaries. The state radiates its power outward to world conquest and domination and internal peace is purchased at the price of tyranny. In the nineteenth century decadence theorists associated the French Revolution with the onset of decadence. The arrival of Napoleon I and Napoleon III on the scene completed the picture of the evolution from a natural political order to tyranny.

The breakdown of the family, the dissolution of conventional sexual morality, and the increase in crime and suicide were all viewed as symptoms of increasing social decadence. Birth control and declining birthrates were seen as evidence of loss of the will to live. France viewed itself as decadent because of the decay of family life, an increase in perverted sexuality, a decline in the birthrate and an increased use of addictive drugs and alcohol.

Thus, the picture we get of nineteenth- and twentieth-century society when viewed through the eyes of the decadence theorist is of a society increasingly anxious and characterized by a loss of self-confidence. More importantly, it is a society filled with social guilt, a society that objectifies and externalizes this guilt in the form of decadence.

Since there was, according to most decadence theorists, no way of remedying the condition, decadence theory was not simply historical pessimism—it was historical despair. Science, with its emphasis on external causes, seemed to support the idea that the process was inevitable and hence

to deepen the despair—thus racial and evolutionary theory. The second law of thermodynamics and notions about the impact and influence of the machine all left little room for human choice and human action.

When we examine the causes offered by the theorists of decadence we see immediately that the supposed causes are explanations after the fact. The theory of cycles, so prominent in the ancient world and so important in the nineteenth century, surely has little in the way of scientific value to recommend it. Even if we enlarge the total number of civilizations to nineteen or twenty, as does Toynbee, we still do not have a sufficiently large population upon which to base an empirical induction. In short, the notion of the historical cycle as an inevitable development is entirely without scientific validity.

The concomitant notion that the lifespan of a culture or civilization is a one-thousand-year period is equally without any scientific basis. The conception of the millennial cycle is, consequently, mythic rather than scientific in origin. We can trace its origin to the ancient Near East, and we know it was a commonplace idea in the Mediterranean world. It seems preposterous to me that twentieth-century man should interpret historical experience in terms of an idea that antedates both the Old and New Testament views of history.

In the third place, the notion of historical inevitability is a modern superstition. Men make history and history does not determine men. In part because of the use of the model of the natural sciences in humanistic study we have tended to seek inevitable scientific causes in order to explain human behavior and identify the dynamic forces in the processes of history. But to seek for natural scientific causes is an inappropriate analytic tool in the study of history. It is true, of course, that much of human behavior is causally determined. The facts of nature, geography, climate, population, the quest for food, and the location of resources all act as determining factors. It is equally true that economics and sheer accident—chance—act as powerful historical determinants. However, man in his free will and with his powers of invention and improvisation transforms the limiting conditions of the causally given. These conditioning factors are like a chess board. The board does not determine the moves but rather presents a set of possible alternatives that rise to astronomical numbers. Thus, man is not fated but rather makes or chooses his own fate. It is precisely the failure to make a choice that increases the determinative power of natural scientific causes. Man's power of invention, man's power of choice, again and again defeats nature and opens to mankind a new realm of freedom. Thus, the determined causal theories of decadence as a historical explanation offer us a mythical rather than a satisfactory historical explanation.

Racial theories of creativity have, as Gobineau knew, little explanatory

power. Cultures create races; races do not create cultures. Spengler shared this theory with Gobineau, and it is a correct reading of what we know about the sources of human creativity. Evolutionary development is far too slow to account for civilizational change and development. The notion that some civilizations decline because their vitality runs out, or because the higher types in the culture gradually disappear, flies in the face of all that we know about the complicated nature of the gene pool.

The economy of Rome was very different from any modern Western economy. One can hardly argue from the economy of Rome to the economy of present-day West Germany. Even when the argument is made in more general terms, such as those employed by Brooks Adams, the schema seems radically faulty. After all, greed and the hunger for power are not exactly new as human motivations, and even when societies indulge these motivations to an unusual degree, as does ours, these motives seem hardly to qualify as a source of decadence.

Henry Adams's belief that the second law of thermodynamics accounted for a kind of cosmic decadence surely must be one of the most preposterous historical explanations ever offered. That it was an improper use of natural scientific explanation goes without saying. As with most decadence theorists, Adams first felt his society was decadent and then looked about for what he considered a plausible explanation.

The fact is that we do not have a plausible theory either of the origin of civilization or of its decline and dissolution. But perhaps dissolution is too strong a word. Remember that what we call the decline of Rome was only the way in which Rome turned into medieval culture. That process was one of creation as much as decline. In the East the Roman empire remained in place and was not overthrown until 1453 and the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. In this instance Rome became Byzantium, but we could hardly describe this process as "the fall of Rome." In terms of historical development, theories of decline and fall are not very useful. Of course, some cultures are simply destroyed from the outside, as was the Aztec and the Andean civilization of South America. While some historians argue that these two cultures were both decadent before they were destroyed, one might well argue that had the Spaniards not delivered the knockout blow these two cultures might have solved their problems and proceeded to the production of a civilization with as much permanence as that of India or China.

The causes of the dissolution of a civilization may be various and may differ one from another. It does not follow that all civilizations die of the same causes nor does it follow that the steps in their dissolution follow in the same sequential order. The evidence can be skewed to make the case that the pattern is the same but empirical study will usually find fault with the explanation.

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If all of what I have just said is even nearly the case, we must ask whether or not there is any truth at all in the notion of decadence. It seems to me apparent that the symptoms of decadence which nineteenth- and twentieth-century theorists of decadence saw in their societies were harmful and dangerous. For instance, the loss of form and purpose in society is obviously undesirable. Sexual promiscuity and the employment of intoxicants is in the experience of all societies undesirable. Indeed, if such practices become very widespread they must eventually endanger a society's existence. Consequently, the danger of the symptoms that the theorists of decadence perceived was real enough. It goes without saying that Western society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was in crisis.

One of the problems of that crisis, however, was the fact that the very process of rationalization, the growth of natural science and the power that science gave man through technological application—recognized by almost all men as progress—only deepened the crisis. Thus, the ability to improve the production of food, our health, and our mastery over the environment has often led to the transformation of our civilization in ways we may not feel desirable. In other words, to remove the goad of scarcity from the population at large may produce behavior in the culture that will, in the long run, endanger society. Is it possible that we can have too much plenty and too much security? What we view as decadence may in some odd way be the penalty we pay for continued progress. Thus, the revolution in communications permits the rapid spread of harmful and destructive notions and values as well as those which are socially valuable. This is not a new problem. It is at least as old as the invention of printing.

If societies and civilizations do not become decadent we still may not entirely dismiss decadence as a problem. In other words, it may be that the central problem in the decline of societies is the decadence of elites and creative minorities. It is these creative minorities who impose their values on society and give form and style to a civilization. As Arnold Toynbee points out, these creative minorities secure their position of leadership through *mimesis* or imitation by the uncreative majority. We know that the number of creative individuals in any society is relatively small. If we were to admit that all those persons listed in *Who's Who in America* belong to this creative minority, the number would still be very small—and this would be to make a gross overestimate. Those ideas which transform society in science, invention, the arts, literature, religion, and politics are very few in number. If the leading two thousand creative people in America were to die tomorrow, our civilization would probably be fatally impaired.

It seems to me that the problem with this very special group is threefold. In the first instance the creative minority loses the power to attract and influence the uncreative majority. There are moments in the history of

every civilization when the creative minority presents ideas or notions that are so esoteric, so far removed from the goals and hopes of ordinary men, that they are simply rejected. When this happens, governments change or fall, styles in literature and the arts change, scientific theories are transformed, and new religions appear. This is not an unusual circumstance; indeed we have seen it going on around us at the present time. The cultural values that we call “modernism” and have dominated Western society for the past hundred years are now under attack and are being rejected by many. We can see this happening in the sixteenth century in a much more dramatic fashion in the Protestant Reformation. In that instance a new creative minority appeared after a period of loss of belief and waning imitation by the uncreative majority. The general process of loss of faith in the old religion might easily be described as decadence. When the new creative minority and their ideas appeared they seemed to sweep all before them. The old dominant minority of monks, priests, bishops, and nuns did not simply disappear. Some of them became Lutherans or Calvinists or Sectarians. But many of them simply lost all faith in their society. Often they retreated still further into the meaningless and unreligious life that had helped to produce the Reformation in the first place. It is very easy to speak of the “decadence” of Catholicism, though no one at the time did because the concept had not yet been invented.

Something of the same sort happened to the feudal nobility at the advent of the modern state. The Burgundian nobility depicted by Johan Huizinga in *The Waning of the Middle Ages* is a good example of the process I am discussing. This nobility simply lost its function in society as better and more effective governing groups took their place. They did not simply go away or disappear. They held on, living a magnificently self-indulgent life that was essentially without meaning or purpose. They were, in fact, decadent. Their decadence is the consequence of their displacement, and that displacement is the result of their loss of a social role. The ideas they represented and created no longer possessed any compelling power. A new and more powerful creative minority had come to the fore.

In the second instance the creative minority for one reason or another—perhaps because of what Arnold Toynbee calls “Schism in the Soul”—no longer provides leadership but behaves irresponsibly. They say, as did Leo X, the Medici pope at the time of Martin Luther’s publication of the Ninety-Five Theses, “God has given us the papacy; now let us enjoy it.” They abdicate their role of leadership for private pleasures and self-indulgence. Remember that the leadership of the creative minority is bought at a fearful price. Its cost is discipline, self-denial, and work of the most difficult sort. It is very tempting, having achieved a position of greatness, to sit back and enjoy life. Values and beliefs are often only formal acknowledgments, while



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the once-creative elite lapse into a round of pleasure-seeking activity. When this happens we describe the elite as decadent, and we know that they are on the road to the dustbin of history.

Finally, there are moments in history when the costs of leadership are so great and the acquisition of skills and understanding so difficult that large numbers of people simply refuse to make the effort necessary for mastery. The craftsman loses his skill or fails to transmit it to the next generation, and the intellectual fails to transmit his knowledge from one generation to another. The consequence is a society that is barbarized.

All of these signs of decadence are not developments implicit in the historical givens; they are not the result of a cycle or the natural developmental pattern of societies but rather the consequences of the behavior of elites, the consequences of choices made by creative minorities. The society, the gene pool, remains the same. It may, if circumstances favor it, give rise to an Einstein, or it may, under other conditions (or even the same conditions) produce a common criminal. To understand this is to be more aware than ever before of the possibilities for good and for evil in human history.

