Decadence as a Theory of History

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The past was only tolerable if one felt above it, instead of having to stare stupidly at it aware of one’s present impotence.

Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 436

The concept of decadence, especially when applied to a society or a culture but in many cases also when used as a term of aesthetic criticism, is closely related to ideas of temporality and historical change. It rests on a sense of difference between past and present, and a sense of the meaning of that difference. The object of study, whether past or present, is located within a grander narrative of historical development; its temporal location, its relation to other periods and historical phases, becomes in itself the explanation of its particular nature and character. “Decadence” when applied to the present tells us that we are late; and this lateness, this following-on, explains why modern culture has developed features that, partly through contrast and partly through analogy with earlier periods, are identified as “decadent”.

In historical discussions, “decadence” is usually treated as a by-product of or a conclusion drawn from a particular grand narrative of history. This is the kind of account offered in the universal histories of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, and the tradition can be traced back via Giambattista Vico to Augustine and Polybius.1 Historical change in this narrative is seen to be cyclical: civilizations and cultures rise and fall. This repetitiveness—Vico’s cycle of barbarism-heroic-classicism-barbarism, Spengler’s view that “eras, epochs, situations, persons are ever repeating themselves true to type”—is not to be dismissed as merely the product of the historian’s romantic inclinations, but lays bare the logic of historical development.2 Societies and cultures are seen as natural objects following the diurnal and seasonal rhythms of nature, or as higher-order biological entities subject to the same life courses as individual animals; inevitably, therefore, they pass through twilight as well as dawn, autumn as well as spring, and periods of decline and decadence as well as periods of growth and maturity. “Let the words youth, growth, maturity, decay—hitherto, and today more than ever, used to express subjective valuations and entirely personal preferences in sociology, ethics and aesthetics—be taken at last as objective descriptions of organic states.”3

The idea of decadence can thus appear as the inevitable consequence of adopting an organic metaphor—or, in the case of Spengler, of believing that “the Classical” and “Modern Civilization” were literally organic entities. However, it is not quite this straightforward. In the first place, the sense of lateness and decline that pervades such narratives often if not always

comes first, and inspires the attempt at making History confirm that we ought to be feeling this way. More importantly, the idea of decadence is not dependent on a single theory of history for its intellectual underpinning, and it is not necessarily tied to the organic metaphor—though it does retain a close connection to ideas of nature and the “natural”. Above all, the concept does not imply a single, unvarying trajectory towards a specified terminus, even if the logic of the organic metaphor seems to demand that. “Decadence” does not necessarily mark the last stage before a cycle repeats itself; it may instead be seen as the penultimate stage before a range of possible endings, or even as a beginning. It marks the moment when the future begins to come within reach, the point where the present weakens enough to make an alternative conceivable—although of course there is little agreement among writers as to what will, or should, take its place.

I. Decadence and Decline

I have so far been using the terms “decadence” and “decline” almost interchangeably. Usually, the two terms are considered to be related but quite distinct; and, on the face of it, only one is generally acceptable in historiography. An admittedly unsystematic bibliographical survey identified twenty-three entries concerned with “decadence” and “history”, all of which dealt with decadence primarily or exclusively as an aesthetic term, focusing above all on the late nineteenth century. A search for “decline” and “history”, on the other hand, produced 146 items: objects perceived as in decline include the Roman Empire, Roman Britain, Roman towns, the Hapsburg Empire, medieval Sicily, medieval Grimsby, medieval towns, the Liberal party (indeed, virtually every book on the Liberal party seems to take “decline” as its organizing theme), British industry, the British economy, and the Bristol music hall. To this list can be added J.K.J. Thompson’s Decline in History, which is not a historiographical study of the use of the concept but a synthetic work that takes the idea of “decline” entirely for granted as a transhistorical reality and seeks to establish its typology. We may conclude that “decadence” is not a term used by professional historians except where the objects of their studies adopt the label themselves; “decline”, on the other hand, is almost an obsession. The clear implication is that the two concepts are quite separate and easily separable, and that “decadence” is simply not acceptable usage.

The latter point is clearly true—but as a rhetorical convention rather than a methodological premise; it is a word one does not use, rather than a set of ideas that one does not employ. Moreover, like many of the conventions of historical writing, the rule is unwritten; internalized by the historian rather than imposed, absorbed through the imitation of accepted historical models rather than taught.4 Various works on historical theory include discussions about the identification of “progress” or “decline” in history. For the most part they reject such metaphysical speculation: “[s]uch sweeping surveys, embodying the notion that what happened was bound to happen, attract by their simplicity but are among good historians readily undermined by the habits of caution and particular study in which they are trained”.5 E.H. Carr, who believed in the reality of historical progress, dismissed Toynbee’s cyclical history as “the characteristic ideology of a society in decline”, while A.L. Rowse characterized Spengler’s account as “utterly tendentious and inspired by the gloomy genius of German Schadenfreude. Because the Germans were defeated, Western civilisation is to be regarded as coming to an

end”. More problematically, however, those who do favour the concept of “decline” in history do not discuss their reasons for the rejection of “decadence”; their motives can only be imagined, on the basis of historians’ habitual behaviour and patterns of thought, without the possibility of substantiating these hypotheses.

Firstly, “decadence” may be too obviously metaphorical. The rhetoric of professional historiography is realism: plain, unadorned, nonliterary, nonfigurative. Its aim is to produce a true, literal representation of past reality, clearly differentiated from fiction or other competing discourses—or, rather, to produce the appearance of such a true, literal representation. Historical language is not in fact transparent or free from figures and metaphors; it is simply that they tend to be “dead”, figures of speech that are not immediately recognized as such—birth, maturity, evolution, development, decline. Perhaps “decadence” is insufficiently moribund in comparison, still too obviously literary, not least because of its specific association with figures like J.-K. Huysmans and Oscar Wilde. That does not of course make “decline” a less figurative term of analysis.

Perhaps because of their anxieties, subconscious or not, about the status of the concept, historians of decline expend considerable effort in trying to establish its historical reality. Decline is something that can, apparently, be measured, demonstrated, expressed in graphs and in the authoritative language of physical science; Thompson’s book is simply the most comprehensive example of such an approach. Decadence appears more elusive and subjective; it depends on a different model of knowledge, the medical diagnosis of surface symptoms which are taken together to indicate an underlying condition. It assumes that a society or culture is an interconnected whole in which certain parts—artistic technique, spiritual orientation, forms of thought (as in Spengler’s idiosyncratic reading of quantum theory and relativity)—reflect and reveal its true state. But so, implicitly, does “decline”, as historians move rapidly from a bewildering range of more or less measurable attributes (declining marginal returns, food shortages, literacy levels, territorial and political fragmentation, levels of overseas trade, and population decline) to more general—and subjective—conclusions. The history of late antiquity offers a good example: a decline in the number of inscriptions recording urban building projects funded by elite benefaction is taken to indicate a decline in urban building activity, which indicates a decline in either the wealth or the civic pride, or both, of urban elites, which in turn indicates a general social malaise.

Each of those interpretative steps can be disputed; but what matters here is the underlying assumption, exactly parallel to that of decadence, of the “microcosm” (and the chance survival of particular types of evidence) reflecting the whole. The

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8 Spengler, *Decline*, 377–428.

emphasis on measurement and “tangibility” is both a rhetorical move and a psychological defence.

Indeed, “decline” may be quite as much of a stumbling-block as “decadence” for historians’ claims to be able to establish the reality of the past. “Decadence” as the all-purpose antonym can readily be seen as a pejorative way of describing any sort of change—but so too “decline”. It has long been recognized that, in R.G. Collingwood’s phrase, “in history as it actually happens there are no mere phenomena of decay: every decline is also a rise, and it is only the historian’s personal failures of knowledge or sympathy that prevent him from seeing this double character, at once creative and destructive, of any historical process”. In other words, the use of the term highlights the essential “perspectivism” of history, the ever-present possibility of redescribing the past in quite different ways according to a different political or moral agenda. Progress and decay, decline and transition: these are equally loaded terms, a matter of choice of presentation rather than “objective reality”.

Decadence, like decline, is closely connected to a “grand narrative” of historical change, and grand narratives, like metaphors, are objects of suspicion and anxiety to most historians, despite their unavoidable dependence on them as a means of making sense of the past. The underlying aim of history is to discern a certain level of order and coherence in events rather than pure randomness and contingency—but not too much order and coherence. Historians tend to emphasize the particular over the general, to prioritize detail and specificity; they therefore tend to resist narratives that pay insufficient attention to individual pieces of evidence and events. They also generally resist notions of determinism; it is probably relevant that, if one considers the implications of the metaphors, decline is capable of being reversed whereas the process of decay may at best be slowed or halted. But of course this is simply one way among many of plotting the past, constructing a narrative from the available materials; it is the story that we wish to tell or are conditioned to expect, given a particular set of cultural assumptions about free will and determinism. We may prefer the apparent “open-endedness” of a story of decline over the inevitable downwards trend of decay, but this is a choice—aesthetic, political, ethical, personal—rather than something inherent in the reality of the past.

This finally leads us to the associations of the concepts, which help provide the grounds on which historians select one story rather than another. “Decline” has for traditionally minded historians the authoritative precedent of Edward Gibbon’s work—though the majority of historians of the later Roman empire have long since abandoned the concept in favour of “transition”, or “late antiquity” as a period in its own right—and apparently has not been irrevocably tainted by the example of Spengler. Otherwise it seems difficult to choose between the two terms: equally value-laden, equally open to exploitation for polemical and political purposes. It seems to be simply the literary and artistic baggage of “decadence” that persuades

13 Berkhofer, Beyond, 126–27.
historians to employ “decline” even when precisely replicating the interpretative moves and assumptions of the history of decay.

II. Historicizing: Past, Present, and Future

Both decadence and decline are historicizing concepts; a society’s temporal context, its location in relation to other periods and societies and within a grander narrative of historical development, is taken to be a clear indication and a sufficient explanation of its condition and prospects. The words refer backwards—as Richard Gilman suggested, “decadence” carries a certain “previousness”—but to more than one point in the past; moreover, they also look forward to possible futures.

Firstly, the terms look back to an earlier, higher stage, from which the present has declined or fallen. They draw on an essential sense of difference between past and present, whether identified in culture, morals, religious sense, or mentality, or all lumped together in an interrelated “organic” whole. There is a long tradition of such nostalgia. Hesiod looked back to the Golden and Silver Ages in contrast to the present age of iron, characterized by estrangement from the gods, violence, the necessity of toil, and the brevity of human life. Late Republican and Augustan Rome looked back to the virtuous early Republic: heroic, frugal, preimperial. Fourth-century pagans like Libanius looked back to the period before Constantine. Later historians have identified still more Golden Ages, in antiquity (classical Greece, the apogee of the Hellenistic cities, and the age of the Antonines) and later (Golden Age Spain, Elizabethan England, the France of Louis XIV, and the early American Republic, among many). The approach is highly flexible, since any period can be elevated as ideal or normative, and any change from that state can be figured as decline—as can the absence of change. Of course it is always possible to push the ideal moment further back in time, to show how the Age of the Antonines was already inferior to the glories of the early Principate, or the seeds of decline had been sown by the second century BCE. The Greeks, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, were always already decadent, if only because they showed themselves to be capable of declining.

Secondly, the terms look back to an analogous stage. The past offers not only the image of the ideal, but also an idea of what it is to be in decline. The concept of decadence is based on a pathology, a set of symptoms, drawn from earlier examples: above all, imperial Rome (as Pierre Chaunu puts it, “la décadence, c’est Rome”), especially under Nero, but also Alexandria and Byzantium; for modern perspectives, Belle Epoque Paris, 1890s London, and Weimar. Theories of decline tend to take the same approach, building up a typology of analogous “declines”; again, the Roman Empire is the archetype. Here too, the past is (in a sense) idealized; it offers a set of symbols of degradation drawn largely from a selection of literary and artistic representations, rather than a rounded or realistic picture of an epoch. Not all narratives of decline look back in this way; ancient accounts find analogies for the present state of society in their (equally caricatured) images of foreign contemporaries like Persia or Carthage. Modern studies draw on a

15 Gilman, Decadence, 5.
wider range of historical examples and almost invariably choose to see themselves as repeating a pre-existing pattern—or at least to fear that they are.\(^\text{18}\)

Thirdly, such accounts may look back to the past for a sense of destination; decadence implies a trajectory and standing as an intermediate stage between the lost ideal and—utter darkness, the triumph of barbarism, a new order? The fall of Rome can be read in any of these ways: as a necessary transition to a higher stage (Christian society, in both G.W.F. Hegel and Toynbee; feudalism in Marx), as the end of civilization for a millennium (Max Weber), or as the beginning of a new, more vigorous Germanic culture (early twentieth-century German medievalists).\(^\text{19}\)

Modern decadence can therefore be seen in the same terms, as the preparation for a new stage, or simply as an end; this may even suggest an appropriate response, for example, the “new monasticism” proposed by Morris Berman for the twilight of American culture (imitating the tactics of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation*, consciously or not). The crucial question for twentieth-century historians of decline was whether, since civilization had already shown its propensity to collapse, repetition was inevitable. Toynbee argued that it might be possible to stave off collapse indefinitely, if the West introduced a world government and returned to religion; once civilization began to collapse, however, the process was unstoppable.\(^\text{20}\)

Spengler, in contrast, presented Western society as a strictly limited phenomenon whose fate was predetermined; “each culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay and never return”.\(^\text{21}\) M.I. Rostovtzeff, pondering the fall of Rome in the light of the Russian Revolution, wondered, “is not every civilization bound to decay as soon as it begins to penetrate the masses?”\(^\text{22}\) Even modern science confirmed this tendency with the Second Law of Thermodynamics—a theory which, in the eyes of some authors, reflected as much as explained the decadence of contemporary culture.\(^\text{23}\)

The dominant modern perspective on the past seeks to combine on the one hand a sense of continuity between past and present, as the modern age is the culmination and fulfilment of all previous developments, and earlier periods contain within themselves familiar elements of what has now become modern, and on the other hand a sense of separation from and superiority to all previous, nonmodern, societies. The combination is neatly caricatured by Nietzsche:

> Now the history of mankind is only the continuation of the history of animals and plants; even in the profoundest depths of the sea the universal historian still finds traces of himself as living slime; gazing in amazement, as at a miracle, at the tremendous course mankind has already run, his gaze trembles at that even more astonishing miracle, modern man himself, who is capable of surveying this course. He stands high and proud upon the pyramid of the

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\(^{18}\) See, for example, Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (London: Duckworth, 2000).

\(^{19}\) On medievalists, see Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1991), 79–117.


\(^{21}\) Spengler, *Decline*, 21.


\(^{23}\) Spengler, *Decline*, 420–22; Chaunu takes the Second Law as his starting point in *Histoire et décadence*. 
world-process; as he lays the keystone of his knowledge at the top of it he seems to call out to nature all around him: “We have reached the goal, we are the goal, we are nature perfected.”

Decadence offers a very different conception of the relation between past and present. It sees the past as fragmented rather than unified; modernity is placed in opposition to some parts, seen as analogous to others. It questions modernity’s choice of comparisons: not classical Greece or the Renaissance but Alexandria or Rome. It undermines modernity’s sense of superiority, and plays on its deep-seated fear that the past has not in fact been overcome, that the triumph over superstition and autocracy has been incomplete, or that, having overcome previous societies, the process of history will continue and it will be overcome and replaced in its turn.

III. Nature, Culture, and the Return of the Past

A sense of historical change, of an emerging difference between past and present, creates a demand for a narrative of development; change is to be seen not simply as random and contingent, but as coherent and ultimately intelligible to human reason. Modernity has offered narratives based on the emerging self-consciousness of the human mind, the fulfilment of an innate instinct to accumulate, the evolution of social structures and technology, and the dynamic of class struggle and exploitation. All of these theories tend to emphasize the overcoming of nature, both of the natural world and of human nature itself; thus Hegel remarks, “in nature, one and the same stable pattern reveals itself, and all change reverts to it. Humanity, on the other hand, has an actual capacity for change, and change for the better”. Early political economists like Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus had been doubtful about the possibility of escaping the tendency of an agrarian economy to revert to the “stationary state”, but later writers were far more confident about the capacities of their age, even if they also had concerns about the implications of this for social and cultural life and for human development.

Decadence explicitly, and decline often implicitly, presents instead the triumph of nature over civilization, undercutting modernity’s delusion that it has somehow escaped such constraints. Civilization may be construed as a natural object, an organism, hence subject to a natural life-cycle. In some ancient writers (but by no means all; the Roman agronomist Columella regarded the idea as nefas [impious]) it is considered obvious that the world might grow old and lose its strength, while society is seen to undergo “natural” developments, as in Polybius’s account of the change from monarchy to despotism. Alternatively—or sometimes in addition—civilization and society can be seen as unnatural objects subject to irresistible natural forces, declining precisely because they are unnatural. Cicero considered the Roman state as a painting, subject to the ravages of time if it is not properly preserved, while Gibbon depicted the Roman Empire as a building finally brought down by the force of gravity. The move from civilization to barbarism is presented as a return to a “natural” state: thus Weber and other economic historians see in the fall of Rome a reversion to a “natural economy” and a return to the countryside, while Rostovtzeff sees a fragile urban civilization overcome by the forces of the uncivilized and

unreconstructed peasantry. It is striking how far Roman (and modern) civilization is located imaginatively in its cities, with the country assumed to be the repository of changeless tradition and the natural; thus William Morris celebrates the return to a rural idyll of authentic feelings and real passions. The inauthenticity and artificiality of modern life are seen to be ultimately unsustainable before the requirements of human nature and the impersonal forces of nature itself.

In some respects, there is a striking resemblance between the perspectives of decadence and those of more explicit and deliberate critics of modernity, such as Friedrich Schiller, Marx, or Nietzsche. These writers too look to the past to highlight the limitations of modernity, its alienating effects and its incompatibility with human happiness, and to undermine the self-serving mythology of “progress”, offering alternative narratives of historical development. Thus Marx’s insistence on the “otherness” of antiquity, against accounts that presented the ancients as capitalists and thereby established capitalism as an “eternal law of nature”; on the contrary, modern society in its turn will be overcome, and is even now nearing its dissolution. Sometimes, in the revolutionary rhetoric of those who professed to follow the ideas of Marx or Nietzsche, the term “decadence” is explicitly deployed; the sense that capitalism will collapse through its own contradictions, or that society is in need of radical reform, shades into a sense that modernity is moribund and feeble, in need of renewal and rebirth.

However, there are also striking differences between these perspectives. Marx sees modernity not as decadent but as having elements of decay, precisely because it has not yet proved capable of allowing human potential to be fully realized; it is not at the end of its lifespan, but rather immature and incomplete:

There is one great fact, characteristic of this our 19th century, a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.

Marx’s history is progressive, against nature and pro-civilization; however much earlier stages like classical Greece—“the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding”—may be perceived as superior and desirable, there is no returning to them: “a man cannot become a child

again, or he becomes childish”.

His analysis of the seductive power of the past, and the danger that it may stultify humans’ capacity for action and innovation, can easily be turned against the ideas of decadence and of the inevitability of repetition:

“The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language . . . The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past.”

Nietzsche goes further in exposing the extent to which all accounts of the past are inspired by our own needs and desires. He undercuts the narrative of progress, modernity’s charter myth, by reinterpreting the “birth of reason” in Greece as the moment of decadence and the loss of authenticity; but by presenting the Greeks as always already decadent he undercuts that narrative too, emphasizing the impossibility of knowledge of the “real” past, untainted by our own desires. “Historical culture is indeed a kind of inborn grey-hairedness, and those who bear its mark from childhood must instinctively believe in the old age of mankind: to age, however, there pertains an appropriate senile occupation, that of looking back, of reckoning up, of closing accounts, of seeking consolation through remembering what has been.” At the same time, however, Nietzsche insists upon the necessity of such myths and illusions for human existence. “Decadence”, which suggests that the future can only ever be a repetition of the past, is a dangerous idea: “[I]s there not concealed in this paralysing belief that humanity is already declining a misunderstanding of a Christian theological idea inherited from the Middle Ages, the idea that the end of the world is coming, that we are fearfully awaiting the Last Judgement?” It is in the end necessary to hold fast to accounts of history that will sustain life, and so he concludes his essay with a self-conscious myth of how the Greeks overcame their dependence on creations of others to create a culture of their own.

IV. Conclusion

Marx and Nietzsche insist on the necessity of forgetfulness, of letting the dead bury their dead, in order that the past may not become “the gravedigger of the present”. “Decadence” insists on remembering, in the belief that the past contains all future possibilities; and it always lurks in the background for those who accept the critique of modernity but are unconvinced by Marx’s vague promises of a new form of society or Nietzsche’s assurances that a myth consciously

36 Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire, 95; Nietzsche, “Uses and Disadvantages,” 62.
chosen can still give meaning to existence. Max Weber offers one of the most striking examples of such pessimism: “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanised petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved.’”

However much we may wish to tell a different story, to return to a time when progress seemed possible, the narrative of decay casts a powerful spell; perhaps, in the end, because modern man would prefer to have failed utterly than to become a stepping-stone for his replacements. Better the familiar barbarians than the unknown future.


38 Compare David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 202: “What is progress now but a desire to go backward to a time when it was possible to go forward?”