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Chapter 35: Politics: Ideologies of Decadence

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Decadence, understood as the deleterious effects of time and processes of change on an object, has obvious implications for political thought. The possibility of decay in the frameworks of communal life, whether the state, society, nation, or civilization, has represented both a source of anxiety and a theoretical problem since the development of self-conscious political analysis in classical antiquity. From the nineteenth century on, the idea that modernity is decadent has underpinned both revolutionary and reactionary movements as well as political action. Nonetheless, "decadence" remains a thoroughly under-theorized concept, both in the sense that very few political theorists have engaged with it systematically—and certainly have not named it as such—and in the sense that it is often deployed polemically rather than analytically or treated as an objective description of the world rather than as a value-laden means of interpreting it. The aim of this chapter is to begin the task of developing a political theory of decadence by providing an outline of the different contexts and strands of thought within which the idea of decadence has been implied or implicated.

Classical Antecedents

The essential components of a political conception of decadence were established at the earliest stages of Western political thought. In the poem *Works and Days*, written in the 8th century BCE, Hesiod characterized his own generation of humanity as a "race of iron," miserable successor to the four earlier races of gold, silver, bronze, and demigods; their fate is constant

labor and sorrow, with communal life dominated by "bribe-taking lords," legal disputes, and destructive strife—and with the prospect of yet another fall into degradation in the future, when men will lose all respect for the gods, law, and one another, and all human relations will be based on force (lines 109–201). Similar visions of the collapse of political institutions, social solidarity, norms, and collective values were presented by Thucydides in the 5th century, in his accounts of the impact of plague in Athens (2.51–3) and civil war in Corcyra (3.81–3); both these events were triggered by external factors, but it is clear from his presentation that Thucydides saw disease and war exposing and exacerbating existing tendencies towards decay—by implication, latent in any political community—rather than creating them.

The process of change of forms of political organization (*politeia*), and above all the ways in which "deviant" constitutions (as tyranny is a deviant form of monarchy, or oligarchy of aristocracy) overthrow superior forms, was a particular concern of Aristotle's analysis of communal life in the *Politics* (1301a–1307b). He identified multiple causes, organized around his overall conception of the need for balance between different groups for the sake of justice and his personal preference for the dominance of the "middling" citizens rather than the arrogant rich or the resentful poor; dominant themes include the role of uncontrolled desires (for recognition, power, or wealth), the associated emotions of fear and insolence, and the difficulty of incorporating disparate elements into the homogenous society of the Greek *polis*. The second-century Greek historian Polybius then elaborated a model of a single repeating cycle of natural constitutional change, known as *anacyclosis* (literally, "wheeling about"), in which periods of reform and improvement (oppressive tyranny is overthrown by aristocracy, degenerate mob rule collapses into chaos and is rescued by monarchy) alternate with a natural tendency to decay and collapse (6.4–9). Polybius's interpretation focuses on the progressive degeneration of the rulers

of the state: the descendants of the king or the aristocrats (the *aristoi*, the best men) are morally and intellectually inferior to their forebears, take power and position for granted, and start to rule in their own interests rather than that of the community, flouting the laws and indulging in fine clothes, exotic delicacies, sexual excess (including the abuse of innocent women and boys), avarice, and the love of money. With democracy, the blame for degeneration is divided between the demagogues ("leaders of the people"), who lose their commitment to equality and freedom and seek to corrupt the *demos* to further their own interests, and the mob for their susceptibility to greed and violence; "Then come tumultuous assemblies, massacres, banishments, redivisions of land; until, after losing all trace of civilization, it has once more found a master and a despot" (6.9).

Polybius expressly presented his model as transhistorical and universal:

> If a man has a clear grasp of these principles he may perhaps make a mistake as to the dates at which this or that will happen to a particular constitution; but he will rarely be entirely mistaken as to the stage of growth or decay at which it has arrived, or as to the point at which it will undergo some revolutionary change. (6.9)

Its most directly influential element for modern political thought was his praise of the Roman system (6.11–18) for its combination of elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, one balancing the other and producing greater stability; this "mixed constitution" was in his view the main cause of the Roman Empire's remarkable success in conquering the other Mediterranean powers, potentially deferring the moment of decay and political crisis.

This proved not to be the case. Within a century, the Roman Republic had collapsed and been replaced by autocracy, and Roman authors began to make their distinctive contribution to

the study of political decay. Roman "decadence" (the Romans themselves did not use the word) is strongly associated with images of excessive consumption (*luxuria*), sexual indulgence, and violence, epitomized initially by over-powerful generals (corrupted by their contact with the East) and then by emperors and their courts, but an inability to control one's appetites was always understood predominantly in political terms, since it went hand in hand with the pursuit of individual power at the expense of the collective good.[1] The broader context was a powerful sense of how far they had fallen away from the practices and virtues of their heroic ancestors: the wealth of empire had made the Roman elite soft, indolent, and effeminate, while the Roman people no longer had any concern for honor but had abdicated their duties—not that there was any significant scope for political participation under the rule of the emperors—and now lived simply for bread and circuses (Juvenal, *Satire* 10: 77–81).

The Roman Empire lasted another half millennium in western Europe and far longer in the eastern Mediterranean: political "decadence" did not in fact bring a swift collapse in imperial stability or control, and the majority of the Empire's population enjoyed centuries of relative peace, largely unaffected by intermittent incompetence, corruption, and bloodletting at the top of the state structure. The influential view of the later Empire as the epitome of "decline and fall" is based to a significant degree on modern admiration for the literature and art of the classical period and the perception that the alleged inferiority of post-classical culture might be attributed to the loss of liberty and the rise of despotism as well as a broader moral and artistic decline.[2] The triumph of Christianity in the fourth century offered a further explanation for the decay of traditional Roman virtues (echoed in the laments of senators like Symmachus, pleading with a Christian emperor that they should be allowed to continue the rituals on which Roman greatness had once depended; *Relation* 3). It also supplied new vocabulary and themes for the repertoire of

declinism, denouncing the degeneracy of "Babylon" in Revelation (18:11–19) and the corruption of all forms of worldly government (an idea developed at greatest length in Augustine's *City of God*), and at the same time mourning the destruction of civilization, however deserved, by heathen barbarians.

Early Modern Debates

The example of ancient Rome, predominantly the collapse of the Republic into civil war and then autocracy, played a central role in political thought from Machiavelli and his contemporaries in fifteenth-century Italy onwards: one of the main aims of such thinkers was to learn to imitate the greatness and success of the Roman Republic and avoid civil war and ruin.[3] But the historical account of Rome's political crisis could be understood in different ways, depending on a thinker's prior assumptions and interests, and how literally one took the claims of ancient authors: (1) as a failure of political institutions to manage the inevitable conflicts of communal life and the passions of those involved; (2) as a failure of character and virtue on the part of the leading men and/or the people as a whole; or (3) as the result of the corrupting effects of wealth, luxury, and empire on society and culture.

In hindsight, we can see how these different perspectives inspired and informed three different strands of thought and debate into the eighteenth century and beyond. The first concentrated on constitutional interpretations and solutions, aiming to establish a state that could withstand corruption and manage its internal divisions.[4] For a thinker like Thomas Hobbes—more influenced by Thucydides's vision of social breakdown than most of his contemporaries—the solution was an all-powerful monarchy that could keep the destructive passions and uncontrolled appetites of people in check. Republicans and constitutionalists were more persuaded by the critique of autocracy presented by the Roman historian Tacitus and looked

rather to the ideas of Polybius and Cicero about a "mixed constitution" that would establish the right balance between different political forces and avoid the tendencies towards corruption and decay that would be released if any one section of the body politic (especially the masses) became too dominant.

The second strand, most prominent in Italian Renaissance Humanism but continuing to influence debates well into the eighteenth century, focused on "virtue," the characters and values of political actors.[5] Virtue in this sense was distinct from, though frequently entangled with, the Christian conception of virtue as a matter of faith, love, and charity; indeed, Machiavelli emphasized the need to replace idealistic and effeminizing Christian morality with a more martial and pragmatic approach, grounded in the recognition that most men are more "treacherous" than "upright."[6] This tradition drew directly on classical concerns with the education and ethos of rulers or citizens—and the danger, exemplified by the Athenian democracy, of entrusting the direction of the state to the uneducated and irrational masses. This theme necessarily also considered virtue's opposite or its absence as a threat to the polity; the question was whether a lack of virtue should be considered the normal state of things, with humans naturally defaulting to self-interest and ambition rather than the self-sacrifice and moderation required for communal life, or whether such vice was the product of external forces such as luxury or contact with foreign manners.

The corrupting effects of luxury were a concern also for the third tradition of thought, which concentrated on the condition of the nation as a whole, with political decay seen as just one area of concern. The growth of commerce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the increase in both national wealth and individual prosperity, suggested to many commentators that European countries might be following the same path as Rome towards moral decay,

declining population, physical degeneracy, and loss of martial spirit—the idea of "civilization" was originally coined, by Victor de Riqueti, Marquis de Mirabeau, in 1756, as a criticism of the contemporary softening of manners.[7] The solution might be characterized as one of redefinition. Within political economy, from Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714) to the works of Adam Smith, "luxury" was understood as a positive thing, since the "vice" of the consumer nevertheless supported the virtuous labor of the producers and increased general wellbeing. Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748; especially Book 20) presented the decline of warlike tendencies lamented by other authors as the rise of the "gentle virtues" of decency and moderation and the tendency of the growth in commerce to promote peace; again, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers adopted and developed this perspective, increasingly presenting rising prosperity as the answer to concerns about political crisis and the new commercial virtues as a suitable replacement for values that were no longer suited to contemporary society. The obvious problem was that such arguments did not properly answer those who remained concerned about the effects of the decline of "ancient" virtues and the extension of aristocratic privileges and lifestyle through the rest of the population.

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, political communities were considered to be always at risk of decline and crisis, whether of their institutions or of the characters and morals of their members, but decay was not regarded as inevitable, nor located at a particular point in time. The debate about luxury and its effects came closest to such a view, as it suggested that nations became vulnerable as their wealth and power increased and as they turned from agriculture to trade and from civic virtue to acquisitiveness; Mirabeau spoke of "the natural cycle running from barbarism to decadence by way of civilization and wealth."[8] The sense that "progress" should better be understood as decline, as the replacement of original, natural man

with artificial man and factitious passions, was still stronger in the essays of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—though he located the happiest and most stable human condition in the period before metallurgy and agriculture, with all subsequent developments leading to increasing inequality and thus ever greater misery and loss of freedom.[9] Austere, anti-democratic, and militaristic Sparta, rather than already unequal and decadent Rome, provided the ideal of a society resistant to decay.[10] Rather than celebrating the present progress of the arts and sciences, Rousseau offered a pessimistic view of a society that was long since in a pervasive state of decadence.

Decadence Historicized

Although Montesquieu's influential 1734 essay *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (*Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*) extended the narrative of Rome's decline (albeit in ever sketchier fashion) into the fifteenth century, the core of his interpretation remained the fall of the Republic: expansion abroad and the corruption of the people led to the loss of liberty and virtue, so that the subsequent 1400 years were simply characterized by the impotence, servitude, weakness, and sickness of the Roman people.[11] Thereafter, however, attention increasingly focused on the slow collapse of the western half of the Empire from the third century onwards. Edward Gibbon's magisterial *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789) drew heavily on Montesquieu's account in emphasizing the loss of freedom and then the corruption of civic virtue (in part under the influence of Christianity) as leaving Rome vulnerable to barbarian attacks; rather than enquiring into the causes of its downfall, he suggested, "we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long."[12] But by shifting the focus away from the Republic (even presenting the rule of the Antonine emperors in the second century as the happiest period of human history), he encouraged readers to focus more on the condition of decadence and the

working through of its consequences—in particular, "we may inquire with anxious curiosity, whether Europe is still threatened with a repetition of those calamities which formerly oppressed the arms and institutions of Rome."[13] Gibbon's own views were relatively optimistic, noting that "ages of laborious ascent have been followed by a moment of rapid downfall" across human history but that the accumulation of knowledge meant that "it may safely be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism."[14] Not all his contemporaries shared that optimism, and in any case such transhistorical equanimity did nothing for concerns about the fate of one's own society; if Rome fell, then the same could easily happen to modern states.[15]

Over the next hundred and fifty years, ever more elaborate accounts of human history were developed, drawing both on a developing European interest, shaped by colonial encounters with non-western cultures, in comparing the histories of different ancient civilizations, and on the project to raise historical studies to the status of a true science by discerning the underlying laws or principles of historical change. If the universal dynamics of the rise and fall of societies could be discerned from past experience, then the present could also be "historicized," understood in this broader context, and thus its present and future trajectory identified. The optimistic narrative of "modernization" identified a moment of fundamental rupture that separated modernity from all that had gone before, and so envisaged continued unstoppable progress based on reason and science, banishing any fear of decadence—even if it was often haunted by a sense of what had been lost in this transition.[16]

Karl Marx's influential view of historical development, which built on the progressivist narratives of philosophers like Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, modified this perspective by identifying a series of such ruptures: human history consisted of a series of stages (modes of

production), with each one eventually falling prey to internal contradictions and being replaced by the next, higher stage, from ancient slave-based production to feudalism to capitalism.[17] Critically, capitalism—the mode of production associated with modernity—was not regarded as the final stage, let alone as the perfect realization of human potential. It was therefore entirely reasonable to look for signs of crisis and decay in the present, as evidence both of the impending collapse of capitalism and of the human necessity of its overthrow and replacement. As Marx observed in a speech he delivered in 1856:

> On the one hand there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of prior human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the later times of the Roman Empire.[18]

One might even take this as a call to revolutionary action, since "force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one."[19] Like many other critics of modernity, Marx was strongly aware of what had been lost in the transition from earlier forms of society—with a particular emphasis on classical art and literature, and the view of the world that had sustained it before "disenchantment" set in—but he sought to "realise its truth at a higher stage" rather than to attempt to turn the clock back.[20] The decadence of the present could not be solved through reaction; "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future."[21]

The main alternative to progressivist or Marxist narratives of historical development was a fully cyclical conception, understanding human development in terms of the rise and fall of distinct civilizations with, at best, only a limited amount of cultural and intellectual resources

being transmitted from one to the next.[22] Such narratives clearly had their roots in earlier ideas, from the philosophical speculations of Giambattista Vico on the recurring cycle (*ricorso*) of the divine, the heroic, and the human in every society to the more historical accounts of Montesquieu, Gibbon, and the universal historians; they were elaborated into detailed, complex schemes, through multiple lengthy volumes, by twentieth-century speculative historians like Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler . These writers often deployed, self-consciously or not, an organic metaphor: society or civilization had come to be understood as a living body that was therefore subject to natural growth and decay, or to youth, maturity, and old age; this thinking went hand in hand with the perception that every aspect of a culture was a manifestation of its essential character and degree of maturity or sickness, with symptoms of decline ranging from a loss of creativity and spirituality (Toynbee) to excessive egalitarianism and loss of national pride (Spengler). There was no necessary reason within such a scheme to assume that modernity must be located "late" in the cycle of development—Toynbee in fact placed the West in the mid-twentieth century at the stage of "the time of troubles," not yet decaying and disintegrating—but this idea became pervasive, even if opinions differed as to where to locate the earlier, superior state of society implied by this interpretation.

In political terms, adherents to a cyclical view of history were often trapped by their chosen metaphor: if society is old and sick, then further progress will simply bring death and the rise of a new set of barbarians, with only the merest possibility of preserving one's own integrity and carrying a small cultural legacy through the Dark Ages to come.[23] Sustaining the current state of things is scarcely an attractive option, even if it is possible; the only hope is some form of reaction or restoration of earlier conditions. Spengler's account of *The Decline of the West* (1918) had made him a celebrity in German-speaking Europe for his pessimistic diagnosis of the

state of contemporary society. The program he developed for his (entirely unsuccessful) political career was striking for its confusing terminology—true socialism for Spengler involved the innately Prussian qualities of discipline, productivity, and self-sacrifice for the nation, exemplified by Friedrich Wilhelm I, whereas Marxism was the divisive "capitalism of the working classes"—but in policy terms was entirely reactionary: trade unions, strikes, unemployment benefits, progressive taxation, and holidays were to be abolished, whereupon Germany would be united under a new aristocracy and an absolute dictatorship.[24]

However, the idea of decadence could easily exist without any sophisticated comparative idea of historical change by focusing solely on the past and the present and judging the corruption of the latter by comparison with the former. Enlightenment thought, especially its tendency to republicanism and atheism, had long prompted fears of the baleful effects if these two trends became too influential; the French Revolution then made this conjunction real, and its opponents increasingly drew on the rhetoric of decadence and decline.[25] As Joseph de Maistre said of the French Revolution:

> [I]t reaches the highest point of corruption ever known; it is pure impurity. In what scene of history can be found so many vices acting at once on the same stage, such an appalling combination of baseness and cruelty, such profound immorality, such a disdain for all decency?[26]

Whereas for Marx the corruption of the present and the oppression of the masses demonstrated the need for progress, for the reactionary the corruption of the present and the growing power of the masses is a clear sign of the need for traditional hierarchies to be restored. Decadence here is an unnatural deviation from an established norm, rather than natural decay, and, as such, offers

hope for the defenders of tradition: whereas the lesson that revolutionaries learned from the Terror was the difficulty of transforming politics without transforming human beings in general, reactionaries developed a sense of how easily a few committed actors can turn the clock back, since they are working to restore the "natural" condition of society and defend the traditional values and preferences of the majority.

The Politics of Decadents

These debates around the nature and development of modernity provided the intellectual context for decadence itself, in the sense of an artistic movement or moment rather than an evaluative concept. The politics of decadence has been much discussed in recent years, with few firm conclusions beyond the suggestion that perhaps the wrong questions are being asked.[27] The political opinions of leading decadent figures, where they express or imply any, are remarkably various, from Baudelaire's aristocratic disdain for democratic America to Wilde's embrace of "socialism" (albeit in his own idiosyncratic understanding) and sympathy with anarchistic ideas to D'Annunzio's later commitment to far-right authoritarian nationalism. Some changed their views quite dramatically over the course of their careers; Anatole Baju began by insisting on the subordination of politics to literary and artistic revolution and ended as a conventional socialist, while Octave Mirbeau moved from right-wing nationalism to anarchism.[28] The tendency to regard the entire literary tradition as essentially elitist and reactionary, eschewing conventional political engagement in favor of solipsistic pronouncements on the autonomy of the artist—and so to dismiss those who do not fit this pattern as outliers—is misleading and driven perhaps by unexamined assumptions about the way "decadence" is deployed in later political propaganda.

As we can see from the survey of the previous centuries of debate around "decline," even if one accepts that the present state of society and culture is decadent, there is no necessary

political conclusion to be drawn from this assessment. Real-existing decadence could be seen as grounds for supporting progressive or revolutionary programs, or for supporting conservative or reactionary ones, or it might simply be accepted as a fact, especially if one's primary concern is with the appropriate artistic means for representing present reality. Self-styled "decadent" art does not even imply a belief that the times are decadent, if such art is understood simply as the depiction of modernity, as Baudelaire suggests.[29] Indeed, the adoption of aesthetic decadence might constitute a rejection of the idea of historical decadence, insofar as the latter represented a reactionary condemnation of contemporary artistic production on the basis of conservative, bourgeois taste while the former celebrated artifice in opposition to ideologically-loaded ideas of "nature" and "the natural."

Even if we focus on questions of individualism and the autonomy of the artist, a crucial theme for most decadents, it is clear that there were many different ways of understanding that theme in political terms, according to what was felt to be the main source of artistic oppression—conservative or politically motivated critics, the tyranny of bourgeois culture, the dominance of the masses, or the decline of aristocracy. "There is no necessity to separate the monarch from the mob," Wilde remarked; "All authority is bad"—but his opinion was clearly not a universal decadent view.[30] Since none of the decadents was concerned to develop a coherent political theory, it is scarcely surprising that their terminology is sometimes inconsistent, to the confusion of some later readers. Baudelaire's idea of "aristocracy," for example, the absence of which in the United States he laments in his essays on Edgar Allan Poe, is clearly based on the hierarchical society of *ancien régime* France and the association of virtue with superior birth and wealth as opposed to egalitarianism and vulgarity; it therefore inevitably tends towards a reactionary position, if only by mourning the loss of traditional social distinctions and

complaining about the excesses of liberty.[31] Wilde's aristocracy, in contrast, owed as much to classical Greek conceptions as to any hereditary nobility; the *aristoi* are "the best" in body and spirit, cultivated through leisure and education, rather than necessarily the highest born, and so at least in theory an entire population could be raised to that status. As one of his characters remarks, "In a good democracy, every man should be an aristocrat."[32] The critical problem with the current state of things, Wilde suggested, was that only a few could develop a very limited individualism as poets, philosophers, or men of culture; socialism was the answer.[33]

It is clearly a waste of time to look for a single coherent political theory or position within the writings of the decadents; at best, we can identify some recurring concerns or themes, few of which have much connection with the wider conception of decadence. The most prominent is, of course, their focus on individualism, whether or not limited to the person of the artist, a theme identified with decadence at an early stage by Paul Bourget in an essay on Baudelaire:

> A society is comparable to a living organism: like an organism, it consists of a collection of lesser organisms, which in turn consist of a collection of cells. The individual is the social cell. […] If the cells' energy becomes independent, the organisms that make up the total organism similarly cease subordinating their energy to the total energy, and the subsequent anarchy leads to the decadence of the whole."[34]

The artist's desire for autonomy and heroism can be expressed in reactionary terms as hostility to modern mass society; this was an especially strong theme in Nietzsche's critique of modernity, but Baudelaire's complaints about "the tyranny of beasts, or zoocracy" come close to such a position, and likewise his disparaging remarks about "the large number of *The Rights of Man*,

which the nineteenth century, in its wisdom, so often enumerates with complacency."[35] However, a commitment to artistic autonomy might equally well inspire resistance to the conformism and hierarchy of older social forms as well as contemporary bourgeois morality; a rejection of mass collective action could nevertheless support the development of smaller groups for mutual support, secret fraternities, or dissident communities.[36] Resistance to any form of external restriction on individual choice can echo and reinforce the liberal tradition of defending minority rights against the tyranny of the majority, especially when it comes to sexual orientation and lifestyle.[37]

The most striking contribution of the decadents to politics relates not to content but to style, modeling a highly self-conscious manner of being in the world and participating in the political realm that affects an attitude of detachment while employing a repertoire of poses, gestures, and general demeanor intended to provoke.[38] Baudelaire presented "dandyism" in explicitly political terms as a new kind of aristocracy, "the last flicker of heroism" in a period of transition between the decay of the old order and the triumph of democracy; the dandy does not attempt to change history, but simultaneously to highlight and defy its current state.[39] Wilde's embodiment of individualism and transgression was still more deliberate and obvious, while his ironic, paradoxical, and provocative style in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) defied on multiple levels the sober conventions of both normal political discourse and revolutionary manifestos:

> It will, of course, be said that such a scheme as is set forth here is quite unpractical and goes against human nature. This is perfectly true. It is unpractical, and it goes against human nature. This is why it is worth carrying out, and that is why one proposes it. For what is a practical scheme? A practical scheme is either a scheme that is already in

> existence, or a scheme that could be carried out under existing conditions. But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish. The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change.[40]

Taken out of context, it is easy to imagine the same words being sincerely declaimed in any number of twentieth-century revolutions; but further, precisely this combination of irony, parody, and seriousness constitutes the distinctive tone of contemporary internet manifestos.[41]

Decadent Politics

In *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924), Thomas Mann anticipated the "politics of decadence" of the twentieth century in the character of Naphta, the negation of the liberal character Settembrini's optimistic, humanist belief in individualism, human rights, and freedom. Naphta claims that the heroic age of "liberalism, individualism, humanistic citizenship, and all that" is long since over:

> [T]hose ideals are dead, or at best lie twitching in their death throes, and those whom they had hoped to finish off have got their foot in the door again. […] The mystery and precept of our age is not liberation and development of the ego. What our age needs, what it demands, what it will create for itself, is—Terror.[42]

The diagnosis and denunciation of decadence has been the dominant mode of twentieth- and twenty-first century authoritarian thought and rhetoric. This tendency has included some left-wing thinkers and movements, following in the tradition of revolutionary declinism established by Marx; denunciation of the decadence of the West and its values was a staple of propaganda in

Soviet Russia and its satellites, while the need for the purgation of decadent urban elites and intellectuals featured in the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.[43] A key figure in the decolonization movement, Frantz Fanon, wrote of the decadence and sickness of the old colonial West, a view endorsed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to the original edition of Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961) as being not a political judgement but simply a medical diagnosis.[44] As before, such claims both asserted the transience of the old order, its inability to command continuing respect or loyalty, and legitimized decisive and violent action to put it out of its misery and usher in the new era.

Predominantly, however, "decadence" has been the characteristic motif of the forces of reaction, to the extent that belief in the bankruptcy of present-day society and the need for its radical renewal is sometimes proposed as a core element in the definition of fascism.[45] Giovanni Gentile's "Manifesto degli Intellettuali del Fascismo" (*Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals*, 1925) denounced "the unleashing of base passions and instincts, which bring about social disintegration, moral degeneration, and a self-centered and mindless spirit of rebellion against all forms of discipline and law,"[46] sentiments echoed by Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), with added emphasis on the role of individualism, universalism, and the glittering allure of Jewish department stores, and by Julius Evola's *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934).

Identical rhetoric resurged from the 1970s onwards, sometimes drawing directly on these explicitly fascist and national socialist texts, sometimes employing less overtly tainted intellectual sources.[47] Thinkers of the New Right in France like Alain de Benoist opposed to "the '68ers" have been especially influential in popularizing a view of modern society as decayed, corrupt, and in desperate need of renewal, including other nationalist groups in Poland, Hungary,

and Greece—nationalism does not preclude collaboration and intellectual borrowing—and in the would-be trans-European identitarian movement: as the identitarian activist Markus Willinger claimed, "We young Europeans […] have only known a culture in collapse."[48] In Russia, Aleksandr Dugin has called for a united strategy of resistance to the "omnipresent evil" of "this age of the utmost decay in general," driven by globalization, Westernization, and postmodernization.[49] In the United States, successive generations of conservative figures have lamented the moral decline and social division unleashed by the liberals and hippies, with obvious influence in recent years in the rhetoric of "draining the swamp" and MAGA ("Making America Great Again").[50]

But this category should also encompass the numerous works purporting to offer a neutral, social-scientific account of the state of different nations or the West, which follow the same template and present the same ideas in less overtly polemical language.[51] Decadence is not offered as a theory, and certainly is rarely named, but is rather presented as an objective fact; an assortment of alleged symptoms, drawn from a familiar assortment—population decline, family crisis (blamed on feminism, uncontrolled promiscuity, and homosexuality), watering down of culture through immigration and falling critical standards, loss of patriotism, decline in religious belief, excessive tolerance of other beliefs (especially Islam)—and traced, explicitly or not, to a single cause, namely, the crisis of the traditional community and its values. As with the more openly polemical accounts of decadence, the community may be defined in different ways, as the nation, the white race, Europe, Christianity, or the West, but it is invariably treated as a natural, unified object; similarly, the threat to its integrity is variously internal (especially cosmopolitan elites and unaccountable politicians) and external (especially Islam).[52]

The inchoate nature of decadent thought is part of the secret of its success as a mode of political discourse and means of recruiting and energizing supporters.[53] It allows every individual resentment to be refigured as the consequence of malign external forces, disclaiming any personal responsibility, and dramatized as part of an epochal struggle for the future of the nation or of civilization itself. A reactionary program focused on restoring hierarchy and elite power can become a mass movement by mobilizing all forms of anxiety about change, from whatever cause, under the single conviction that such change must be a sign of decline from the (imaginary) virtuous and superior past.

[1] Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: a Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapters 2–4.

[2] Jonathan Theodore, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), especially chapter 3, "The Fall of Rome and Ideas of Decline," 83–111. For discussion of the specific question of "corruption" in the later Empire, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

[3] The account of J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, new ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) remains essential. David Armitage, *Civil Wars: a History in Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) offers an overview of early modern and modern discussions of the most extreme manifestations of political breakdown.

[4] See generally Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern Volume II: New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) and the more detailed and provocative analysis by Benjamin Straumann, *Crisis and Constitutionalism: Roman Political Thought from the Fall of the Republic to the Age of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[5] See, most recently, James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), but Quentin Skinner's *Visions of Politics, Volume II: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) remains important; see also Russell Price, "The Senses of *Virtú* in Machiavelli," *European Studies Review* 3 (1973), 315–45; and Marisa Linton, *Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

[6] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quintin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 61–62.

[7] Michael Sonenscher, "Barbarism and Civilisation," in *A Companion to Intellectual History*, ed. Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 288–302; Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, chapters 5–7. Donald A. Winch, *Riches and Poverty: an Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). The essays in J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) offer different perspectives on the debates about virtue, commerce, and luxury.

[8] Victor de Riqueti, Marquis de Mirabeau, *L'ami des hommes, ou Traité de la population* (Avignon, 1756), 1:176.

[9] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (Geneva, 1750) and *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of the Inequality of Mankind* (Geneva, 1754), in *The Basic Political Writings*, 2nd ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012). Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Christopher Brooke, "Rousseau's Political Philosophy: Stoic and Augustinian Origins," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94–123.

[10] Elizabeth Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) remains an excellent introduction to the reception and influence of Sparta as anti-decadent and anti-democratic; see also the overview by Paul Cartledge, "Spartan Traditions and Receptions," in *Hermathena* 181 (2006): 41–9, and the chapters in Stephen Hodkinson and Ian Macgregor Morris, eds., *Sparta in Modern Thought: Politics, History and Culture* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2012).

[11] See Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, trans. David Lowenthal (New York: Free Press, 1965).

[12] Edward Gibbon, "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West," in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 4:160–9.

[13] Gibbon 4:161.

[14] Gibbon 4:167–8.

[15] For Gibbon's intellectual context and influence, see David Womersley, *The Transformation of "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, especially vol. 1, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jonathan Theodore, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Karen O'Brien and Brian Young, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[16] See Neville Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), especially 117–140. For "historicism" generally, see Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) and Patrick Hamilton, *Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[17] For Marx's theory of history, see Terence Ball, "History: Critique and Irony," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Marx*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 124–42, and G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). On the theme of decadence within historical theory, see Neville Morley, "Decadence as a Theory of History," in *New Literary History* 35, no. 4 (2004): 573–85. On decadence and modernity, albeit with a mainly literary focus, see Jane Desmarais, "Decadence and the Critique of Modernity," in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 98–114.

[18] Karl Marx, "Speech at the anniversary of the *People's Paper* (1856)," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), 14:655–6.

[19] Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 1:916. Note that Marx was here talking about the use of force to transform "feudal" colonial economies into capitalist ones, but his followers extended it to their own role in hastening the transition to communism.

[20] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (1857–1858; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 111.

[21] Karl Marx, "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), 95.

[22] An old but still useful discussion is R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 63–68 on Vico, 159–65 on Toynbee, and 181–3 on Spengler. Nietzsche's contribution to nineteenth-century discussions of decadence was of course immense (as discussed elsewhere in this volume), but primarily in cultural rather than political terms, and not directed towards the development of an overarching historical framework.

[23] Such "monastic" quietism continues to be promoted as a serious strategy, e.g., Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

[24] Oswald Spengler, *Preussentum und Sozialismus* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1919).

[25] Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France* (1797; Lyon: M. P. Rusand, 1854). On de Maistre and the nineteenth-century French counter-revolutionaries, see Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39–57.

[26] de Maistre, *Considérations*, 61–62.

[27] Essential overview from Matthew Potolsky, "Decadence and Politics," in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 152–66. See also Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds., *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[28] David Weir, "Decadent Anarchism, Anarchistic Decadence: Contradictory Cultures, Complementary Politics," in Carolin Kosuch, ed., *Anarchism and the Avant-Garde: Radical Arts and Politics in Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 129–52.

[29] See, most obviously, Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1859), in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 390–435.

[30] Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume 4: Criticism*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 261. On Wilde's

essay, see Lawrence Danson, "Wilde as Critic and Theorist," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 80–95.

[31] Baudelaire's remarks come from his two essays on Edgar Allan Poe in *Selected Writings*, 162–208; see e.g., 164, 196–7.

[32] Oscar Wilde, *Vera, or the Nihilists* (1880), in *Complete Works* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 665.

[33] Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," 233.

[34] Paul Bourget, "The Example of Baudelaire" (1881), trans. Nancy O'Connor, *New England Review* 30, no. 2 (2009): 98.

[35] On Nietzsche, see Nicholas D. More, "The Philosophy of Decadence," in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. Desmarais and Weir, 184–90. Baudelaire, *Selected Writings*, 174, 164.

[36] Potolsky, "Decadence and Politics," discusses the formation and role of decadent groups.

[37] Cf. Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859–1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[38] Potolsky, "Decadence and Politics"; see Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3–16, on "decadence as a specific mode of participation in the political realm" involving detachment, camp, parody, and perversity as strategies.

[39] Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 419–22.

[40] Wilde, "Soul of Man," 262.

[41] For an example of two different styles of twenty-first century "decadent politics," see the review of an alt-right blogger's manifesto by the former Trump associate Michael Anton, "Are the Kids Al(t)right?" *Claremont Review of Books* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2019), https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/are-the-kids-altright/. Anton had, using the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus, written the notorious "The Flight 93 Election," *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/, denouncing conservatives who

lamented the decline of the United States but refused to support the one man who might restore American greatness.

[42] Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1996), 392, 393.

[43] Summarized by Alex Schulman, "Purge Politik: the Political Functions of Decadence in Fascism," *Human Rights Review* 8 (2006): 5–34.

[44] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), e.g., 9, 3, 96, 127; Sartre's quote at 8.

[45] See, e.g., Roger Griffin, "Modernity and the New Order," in *A Fascist Century: Essays by Roger Griffin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 24–45; Roger Eatwell, "Fascism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[46] Giovanni Gentile, "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals," in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, ed. Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 297.

[47] The recently-founded Oswald Spengler Society places great emphasis on the fact that Spengler disliked the Nazis for being too proletarian and too concerned with race rather than culture.

[48] Jens Rydgven, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). The quotation is from Markus Willinger, *Generation Identity: A Declaration of War Against the '68ers* (London: Arktos, 2013).

[49] Aleksandr Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory* (London: Arktos, 2012), 158, 170–2.

[50] Robert Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Pat Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2001); other examples in Schulman, "Purge Politik," 28–31.

[51] See, for example, Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000); Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe:*

Immigration, Identity, Islam (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader, 2020).

[52] It is interesting to note how far the discourse of decadence has echoes in the way that the concept of *jahiliyya*, ignorance of Islam, is applied to the modern secular world in the traditions of political Islam associated with figures like Sayyid Qutb and Mawlana Mawdudi; its symptoms include homosexuality, fornication, pornography, women's liberation, drugs, and other indulgences, which demonstrate the need for *jihad* to restore God's dominion. The crucial difference is that this is ascribed to individuals deviating from the ways of Islam, not to society becoming old (Western culture is treated as inherently secular and decadent, rather than having become so). See, e.g., James Toth, *Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Roy Jackson, *Mawlana Mawdudi and Political Islam: Authority and the Islamic State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

[53] Cf. Dimitri Almeida, "Decadence and Indifferentiation in the Ideology of the Front National," *French Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2014): 221–32, and Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, passim.