

The Idea of Decline in Western History (Lecture)

Arthur Herman

March 18, 1997

Contents

Introduction	3
Speech Begins	4
Q&A	12

Arthur Herman talked about *The Idea of Decline in Western History*. The book focuses on the contributions of various 19th and 20th century thinkers, such as Nietzsche and Freud, in a broad survey of the literature of cultural decline.

Linda Chavez

President Center for Equal Opportunity

Arthur Herman

Coordinator Smithsonian Associates->Western Heritage Program

HOSTING ORGANIZATION: Center for Equal Opportunity

Location: Washington, District of Columbia, United States

First Aired: Mar 29, 1997 | 7:59pm EST | C-SPAN 2

Introduction

C-SPAN voice-over: Arthur Herman is professor of History at George Mason University. And coordinator of the western civilization program at the Smithsonian. He spoke of the Center for Equal Opportunity in Washington

Linda Chavez: Good morning I'd like to welcome all of you. To The Center for Equal opportunities. Regular ongoing series of book luncheons and we are very privileged today to have with us Arthur Herman who is the author of the idea of decline in Western history professor Hermann is professor of history at George Mason University. He is also the coordinator of the western civilization program at the Smithsonian Institution. And we are particularly pleased to have her first. Professor Herman here today to talk about his book. The decline the idea of decline in Western history. There have been as all of you know. Many books written over the years about the decline of western civilization. It is in fact an ongoing theme in. Critiques of history and in a series of books that have been popular particularly within the last few years Paul Kennedy's. Book. Even Judge Bork's book. Slouching Toward Gomorrah. Which has dealt with the idea of. Decline in the West and in the United States in particular but. Professor Herman's book is not technically speaking. A book about the decline of the West. It is rather an intellectual history. About the idea of decline in the West which I think is a very important and subtle distinction. And I'd like to read just a paragraph which I think. Says very well sums up very well. The thesis of Professor Herman's book and it is from his introduction. Some people talk about the decline of civilization. Others live it. This is a book about the origins and diffusion of an intellectual tradition. The idea of the decline of the West. We will see how it formed with the dark. Underside of modern Europe. And thought in the nineteenth century. And how it became. Arguably the single most dominant and influential theme in culture and politics. In the twentieth century. Not only has it affected people's lives in unexpected. And startling

ways. Which we will examine in some detail. But it may also be inseparable from the idea of civilization itself.

Professor Herman's book has met with much critical acclaim and I'd like to just read a few of the things that have been said about it. Quoting one statement by Gertrude Hamill far who is an eminent historian herself and who happens to be with us today. And she described the book as powerful and persuasive. Publishers Weekly described. The book in this way.

Herman takes us through these heavy thoughts. With great panache and areadition. A brisk and cordial guide to the Slough of Despond.

Fred Siegel writing in The Weekly Standard. Said

his book. Should trigger a long overdue scholarly. Debate.

And the Los Angeles Times said

It deserves a significant audience and we are very happy today. To help provide some of that audience

and Professor Herman. Will speak for about twenty and then we will have questions and answers. Thank you.

Speech Begins

Arthur Herman: Well I want to tell you that it's a real pleasure to be here. This is a wonderful venue for me. And it's one that I would have would have picked for myself. Even if Linda had invited me to come out here. Because I think a lot of the issues that I talk about in the book. Are of interest to the ongoing conversation that does take place here at the Center for Economic Opportunity and those kinds of things and and. I think that the book has a certain kind of impact on that. Plus the fact that I don't ever really turn down an invitation to talk about my own book. So that plays its part and. In this. In this decision as well. What I thought I would do is just talk briefly about what I wanted to do with the book. Which is also a way to kind of summarize the major issues that. Inform the whole the whole discussion there. But I thought what I would also do is talk about some things some themes of it. And issues that are of interest to the kinds of questions and again the kind of conversation about the role of multiculturalism the role of different. And often conflicting ethnic identities and. In the shaping of American civilization and whatever. Whatever happens with it from. From this point on. And basically what I want to do with the book was to try and explain how an idea a way of talking about history. A way of talking about change. About the fate of societies and of civilizations.

A way of talking that centered those discussions in terms of inevitable decline and degeneration. To show how this way of talking. First came into being. How it originated. And then also. To talk to has come to permeate so many aspects of modern culture. Turning up in all kinds of surprising in unusual places. From a modernism of the all the way through onto. Onto figures like bizarre figures like the Unabomber. And Vice President Albert Gore. The which I talk about in detail and. In the book . This is. And this way of talking what I try to show in the book is that this way of talking. Is reflected not just in the kind of pessimism. That's notions of decline. Not just in the kind of pessimism that surveys.

Opinion surveys always managed to pick up from the American public in which every time they're asked about sixty percent or seventy percent of the citizens believe that the country is on the wrong track. And that they always seem to feel this regardless of what that track might be that this just seems to be a natural reaction to where to where in a sense America seems to be going. But I also tried to show that this show how this idea this way of talking this idea of the Klein. Really underpins the movement of various. Radical discontents. In this country. Whether you're talking about radical environmentalism. Whether you're talking about postmodernism . That permeates so much of academic life and intellectual discourse that takes place in universities. And the whole series of movements that people usually talk about you describe as. Culturalism . You know what I wanted to show is that all of these movements really share the same basic assumption. And that is that societies built on Western industrial. Models are all doomed to destruction. That they all. Destroy human. Vitality and creativity. That industrial societies. Modern industrial societies. Tear apart. Communities. And a kind of natural social holes. That had that grown up before. Industrialization and modern society here. And that in the end the end. These modern industrial societies have no. Values and that's a key word here throughout the book and the way in which the notion of values becomes so is so you know. Permeates so much of our discussion here. Our current cultural debates. Is itself in many ways reflective of this idea of decline that the only thing really that modern industrial societies. Produce. It's assumed. Are. Material goods which. You know. Everyone has too much of that anyway. So that it doesn't serve any purpose and.

That and also these little armies. Of shallow.

Self interested. Easily manipulable.

Little a comment on this. To come out of it what Herbert Marcuse called one dimensional man. And what Frederick nature called. The last man. The last man the last man who would emerge at the end of at the end of western civilization. Human beings who were really in nature's view was more insects than they were human. And that. And then. Because of this then the assumption is that in order to recover some sense of humanity in order to cover our sense of ourselves we have to do that is to turn away from the west. And modern Western values . To look for some kind of a new dawn some sort of. New Order. That is going to replace its inevitable collapse. And that we built upon the ruins the ruins of that bankrupt and discredited civilization. So

that's the overall trajectory of the book. But I also at the same time wanted to show something else. And that is how the first people to become convinced that Western civilization is in decline and that idea by the way starts very early in the nineteenth century. That these people who saw the west as systematically unraveling itself. Were not in any kind of way radicals. That . That includes people's intellectual such as Henry Adams in this country. But were instead people who were deeply concerned and. Perhaps also a little confused conservatives who were generally worried about the direction that their own societies were taking. But that by choosing to explain these in the consequences. In terms of. Decline in terms of the generation of the other sorts of other kinds of gloom and doom forecasts that went with it.

That. That is sense that they had that they ended up producing this view of the West as systematically destroying itself. These are the people that I talk about as the historical.

Pessimists. And this was a matter of real concern at the values. The humane. Liberal values. And Western. Judeo Christian values that they believed in were coming under attack and were were in a sense under a kind of pressure that they couldn't withstand. And that by talking about these changes in this way. What they did what people like Henry Adams. Did was to open the door. Then to more radical solutions to the problem.

To those who had plans and agendas. Springing from this basic assumption that the that. If the modern West is in decline. It's because it deserves to be declining that the that the fruits of it that the seeds of destruction are there from the very beginning. And that therefore if we're going to escape from that kind of collapsible where they've got to do then is to look for that kind. For a range of alternatives. These are the people. I call the cultural pessimists. And so what I was really trying to do was to show how the historical pessimist arguments. Then open the door. Create a situation these more radical solutions. Suddenly come forward as being more acceptable. And becoming becoming. The solution as I say the basic idea being that the faster the West collapses then the better.

The better for everyone involved.

So this opened the way. The historical pessimism opened the way first to racist. Doctrines and. Themes which argued that the only way then to save civilization was through a radical racial purity. That the process of civilization itself. Was creating a society of. Of of racial mixtures and cultural degradation. And that only by protecting white. The original white. Arion. Race and its virtues from that kind of pollution. The only way in which the West was going to survive. It could pave the way for race based eugenics.

With that same sense that the West was facing a crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. Of degeneracy thanks to industrial civilization and therefore what had to be done now. Was a. Was to preserve the race through various kinds of drastic measures. Excluding those who are unfit. And unable to carry this burden of civilization that the white race had had assumed for itself here. And it also opened a door for various

radical nationalist movements. Now which is what happens is of course. And in many ways the Nazis. Are the first European generation. Of cultural pessimists of men raised in a nineteenth century. German. Intellectual tradition. That was permeated by this contempt for. Bush lost civilization. And its values. And also permeated by this fear that industrial society. Was going to shatter and disrupt the very precious. Sources and sacred sources of cultural uncreate that were found in traditional Germany at these would all be destroyed through industrialization and therefore that represent this this this this threat. This direct mortal threat. To Germany's own soul. Now that German tradition . That tradition of German Historical pessimism academic. A cultural criticism of the modern West is also important. I think for understanding. Our own multiculturalist impulses today. And the reason I say that is that it. This German tradition. Comes to this country. Through a particular and important channel. Namely through the intellectual legacy of. W.E.B. Dubois . The man who is. Of course today. The prince was viewed as the premier African-American. Philosopher and thinker. But who is also in it in a sense the spiritual godfather of. Of multiculturalism. In its various shapes and forms . Now the boy's reputation as being this. Profound and important figure. Is one I'm not going to try and take away from it so. It's built on very solid foundations he was extremely prolific. As a journalist and as an author a story and philosopher.

Writer of fiction was a brilliant writer. Brilliant command of prose. He was a devastating critic. Of prevalent white attitudes regarding race and and and. Issues of segregation which which de boys watched. Take place. The Prophet the development of Jim Crow was something which he. Which he watched come into place. During his lifetime . But it's also worth bearing in mind I think that. He is that his own assumptions. These sanctions from which he produced this prodigious body of work and study . Were the same assumptions. Is that of other fans. German academic thinkers. And this is where the ground really comes out of and. I have a whole chapter on him there to try and try and point this out in detail and McAvennie ways I thought. When I when I wrote it I was never thinking. That this is. This is easily the most important part of the book. Here this is the one that's going to track the most attention. You know stating this major figure. To boys is really you know a. In a sense of an intellectual. Intellectual German philosopher and that these are the basis of all its assumptions. And of course what happened was is that the reviewers all didn't pay any attention to it. Well except all except the Weekly Standard Fred Siegel did. Dubois's. Experience. Exposure to German philosophy came during his two years of study. At the University of Berlin. Eight hundred ninety two through ninety four and those years really changed his life. It really had. And he admitted this later on it really had much more of an impact on his intellectual development. Then his years as an undergraduate at Harvard. And his work with the leading teachers there never really had the kind of transformative impact. That coming in contact with with the. German Educational system but also with. The key professors and intellectual movements there. Did have. So what was it he learnt what was it he did pick up from it. For those years in Germany.

Well first of all he did pick up this idea that the industrial West is really. Doomed. If it continues to follow this capitalist model of development. These were the ideas the armchair socialists who supervised his Ph D. thesis. Who has preached this idea of the inevitable need for a socialist state. Here . As a means of correcting this inevitable. Direction of decline. Of the rhetoric that they used to talk about the impact of industrialization. On workers of. Workers reduced to wage slaves these kinds of terms the notion of industrialization is slavery. Certainly had an impact on do boys in his way and touched deeply on his own. On his own understanding of. Of the relationship here between slavery in the West. And really had a big impact on shaping that. But also at the same time. They also . Point that he picked up was that industrial societies like America. Sapped away. The energy and vitality . Of the people and culture that were part of it. And here is this German dichotomy that was so important one thousand century between. Soul destroying. Civilization. Civilization. The own. Versus the soul restoring . Culture Couture. This permeates all of the boys as work and becomes a key distinction and dichotomy in his own mind. For understanding the role that African-Americans are going to come to play in American society.

As well. Here that in a sense that black men and women in America. Find themselves in the same position. And are going to be talked about by the boys in the same way as. As these philosophers talked about German peasants.

That is since they had the same virtues of German peasants were those the virtues of. Of blacks who arrived here in America this kind of inner creativity. A kind of natural vitality.

Which their situation in America in living in this kind of oppressive. Culture and civilization. Takes away and saps away. And again. That this is again a distinction. Distinct from. Although it a process which was a part and parcel of slavery . But it is also something which saw the end of slavery in a mancipation does not and that that process of soul destroying civilization. Grinds whether free or slaves. And of course. The boy's term for this kind of natural creativity and natural vitality soul. You see takes place. Arises also from this German. Context German. Cultural critics have been using souls they live for a long time long before Dubois.

Appeared on the scene. And again. It was the idea of soul. Him. Was to be understood this natural vitality of soul was to be understood in racial terms that in. Fact. Each race. Each race had its own little bundle of vitality. Here. Which in the case of blacks. Was still uncontaminated by contact with. You see this.

Destructive civilization. Western capitalism. And all of the kinds of institutions that it create so would the boys did was to take up these themes. And to use them to intervene . On the African American . Intellectual debates . That were raging at the turn of the century. And he really reshapes them in a very very crucial time. He's going to use those ideas not just to discredit. Booker T. Washington. Is a view of how blacks are to assimilate into modern American society. And for do boys the whole notion of assimilation of assimilation in Washington's terms and that is blacks becoming active. Willing participants in the free enterprise capitalist system. Was for

in this is the last thing in the world you want to do you don't want to attach yourself to the soul destroying. Mechanism at all you want to break free from it you want to find alternatives from it.

So he uses it first to discredit Booker T. Washington. But he's also going to use it to reject the.

Earlier models of black nationalism. Of figures like Alexander Crowe Mel. And Henry Turner. These were black nationalists. Of an earlier generation . They had been.

Passionately committed to. Black Nationalism. They were. Passionately committed to a sense of racial pride. But they had also insisted that. If blacks were going to change their status in the world. That they also needed to acknowledge the values of white civilization. And its institutions. Science technology . Capitalism. And of course also. The values of Christianity in the judeo christian tradition.

Both criminal and Turner were or were bishops in the Methodist Episcopalian church and. And for them. White civilization. Also included necessarily included these Christian. This Christian framework as well. So a divorce is going to do is reject all of that. And overturn it. And it's interesting to speculate I think. How the history of black nationalism. Would have been different if it had not turned its. Back at the.

On this story and is called the civilization ists. Thesis this idea that the simulation includes a kind of a kind of a kind of assimilation in a cultural and in a values sense. As well as one of terms of political and social mobility that also has to involve this. Embrace of a got a larger cultural ability but Dubois make sure. And the growth of his influence make sure that that does not happen. Because Dubois was convinced that the West. And the industrial colonial empires. That it clustered around it were now finished. And in many ways. His view about the West. Here is very much akin DAWs Well Spangler's the.

Overlap between Spangler's decline of the West and the boys writings on the same themes. Is really remarkable and they really do. They really very well. Instead what Dubois saw in the future. Was the rise of. What he called the darker Nations. To global power. First in the case of. The yellow races. And we have to remember that the boys was writing at a time when Japan. Was emerging as a major player in Colonial. Conflicts and on the world stage at the turn of the century. But then. But then after the other races had risen to power that it would be. There would be black Africans to and Dubois is a notion. They hold these famous phrase that this is that we live in the the age of the color line. But we have to realize is that for devoiced. This was a color line. The balance of power.

Along which was now about to shift in his mind.

But these empires these empires of the dark Nations. Would all be based upon again this racial violence model in which technology. Material wealth. Are tools. Tools to be used by a racial elite. As a means by which to to gain the levers of power. And to direct them here. And. Would be these empires also would draw upon the. There is this element of the Marxist model. And again for Dubois As for later model.

Multiculturalism. Marxism ZX appeal. Is simply that it is in fact a revolutionary. Doctrine that it is.

Anti-capitalist. And therefore implicitly. Anti western. That the use that Marxism is going to play in these kinds of this kind of development. Is as a as a kind of. Anti model. To this larger. Industrial western cultural and economic complex. And it's really kind of interesting to see how the Raul how the rise of radical. Racial movements. Beginning in the Follow. Also the rise of Dubois his reputation. As he moves from a period time which was really in the shadows which was the forty's and fifty's. And suddenly becomes the great model. And the intellectual. Mentor for a whole generation of black radicals starting first with the black power. And figures like like Malcolm X.. Then in. Then with the development of African-American studies and and.

And and Afro centrism. And now being treated today as a kind of spokesman for the for a black Atlanta consciousness. Big put in these kinds of larger postmodern terms as someone who had who has comes up with a new a new alternative vision for individuals and community as well as culture. That really in the end to boys is the intellectual godfather for all these movements. Which celebrate.

vitalism. Of the person of color. And again. I want to point out this is the link again to the sort of German view of the role of cool tour. Of natural vitality here. Which western society. Takes down destroys and undermines. And of course these kinds of movements this. This movement of racial vitality includes not just. Not just movements in black and radical black politics but we also see it in movements like La Raza. For example is a perfectly good example and in fact. Their vision of a kind of. Southwestern Hispanic empire. Stretching out. Has enormous affinities and very similar and. Coached and very similar terms to the way in which people like Marcus Garvey talked about a a black. Empire in Africa.

In fact Marcus Garvey is really a good example of how Dubois's. Influence works.

In this story. Because on the one hand. Garvey had this strong emphasis on the back to Africa. Movement. Of blacks actually physically returning to Africa which. Do boys. By By the by about one thousand ten and really abandoned as being as being unrealistic. He also Garvey also. Preached very much the preach the need for intellectual and economic advancement.

Which. Of theme by the way which Louis Farrakhan is now picked up and has made us central to him is one of the reasons why very often he's treated as being as a sort of sympathetic figure in certain regards. Certain aspects of his ideas being treated sympathetically here. But again it's important to point out that this notion of economic advancement for blacks.

Was seen as a way not to make black people. Rich. But instead but to make them. Powerful. That wealth is. Again seen simply as a lever for power. Not for. Individual events meant. Not for individual enrichment and pursuit of individual happiness. But as a means to gain political power in this way. And for Garvey. That means to power was to destroy white supremacy.

To shatter the bonds. Of white supremacy and instead to create this master black race. As he said a grand racial hierarchy. And an empire. On which he said the sun will never set. Again. Drawing upon that kind of those kinds of imperialist models. Here in order to in order to project a future a future for for the darker races. Well that kind of. That kind of. Overblown rhetoric is no longer so present now in the multiculturalist debate people don't. Creating a grand racial hierarchies.

For the it survives of course and people like Farah Khan and some of the at some of the. Some of the after a centrist. But this whole way of seeing history. And seeing American society. In terms of group histories in terms of.

Group identities.

All reflect that to Boise and. Legacy and again also reflect that.

German legacy . That what we're dealing with and we come when we confront these kinds of issues in the multicultural debate. Are essentially sensually. Nineteenth century ways of talking about. Society and race. And then if you take that away. If you take away. That that implicit. Decline is in the assumptions that under. Underpin it. That. That the whole multicultural empire has kind of collapses of its own.

And I think in many ways this is the this is the last point I want to make and it's an important one. And that is true and that is that the goals of multiculturalism. Of radical multiculturalism. Again have nothing to do with questions of assimilation. Here. Or or inclusion. Because it. Views from the very beginning. It views Western society as corrupt as soul destroying. And all of its mechanisms as. As as agents of this kind of corrupting. Corrupting power. Now the question. Really for the Baltic culture list. Debate is the question not about assimilation or inclusion but about power. Of how to construct a patchwork quilt. Here. Out of American society in which eventually eventually end in big. And because inevitably white.

Bushwalk capitalism. The pieces. That it contributes here. Are going to eventually. Unravel and disappear. That in a sense that multiculturalism can take the offensive and. And have confidence in its goals. Because in the end. It's going when you see in the end as Dubois had record had had had asserted that the that the future of humanity you see belongs to the people of color and that out of that will come. Will come the emergence then of a new kind of civilization. When the West. When the West. And its various. Apparatuses for control. Have disappeared.

So the issue of assimilation. And the question of how those kinds of issues will finally be resolved I think. In the end has to come down to a really close debate. And a critical analysis of those causes precisely those kinds of assumptions that underpin it. And. And that drive forward its forces in this kind of ongoing debate. And that is its assumptions about the West as assumptions about the direction of history and its assumptions about the nature very nature of civil society. That the that the virtues that civil society that modern industrial society. Can create its . Its social mobility for example and geographic mobility. Its ability to generate large amounts of material affluence.

Its ability to empower individuals. To enjoy freedom. Of all sorts and. In various and new and unexpected ways. And that that notion of freedom has itself a fundamental moral value.

All of these things are all of these are virtues which are. From the beginning screened out. And the notion that. The idea of a theory of history. Which could incorporate those virtues. While at same time recognizing its shortcomings. Baby away not just for new Nabl Americans to regain a sense of confidence about the future. But it may also be a way to gain a new angle in a new direction on this larger. Multiculturalist. Debate that's going on with thank you very much.

Q&A

Linda Chavez: The usual order now is to open the floor up to questions and I will let Professor Herman. Recognize you but I would ask. Those please identify yourselves.

****Questioner #1:** You spoke at much greater length in your book about various thinkers who were inspired by this. Frankfurt School. I found it curious that you had no. Chapter in your book on blogs. And I think had you had such a chapter. Had you focused more directly more explicitly in a greater length on marks. I think you might have had to modify your opening remarks today and also a theme that goes through the book. That the animists. Of these thinkers . What we call it. Declan declined us or whatever. Their animus against modern industrial society. I think you would then have to say that yes to be sure that's true of some of them. But for a great many others. And I think particularly for the moderns the animus against modern industrial. Capitalist society and its capitalism is crucial in the case of. For example. Who did not propose to transcend industrialists. And I wondered I wonder what. Why you did not in fact have didn't have that chapter on books.

Arthur Herman: Well, that's an excellent question. And it's one that runs through my mind. Not just now but. From time to time and. And it's a. And it's an issue which in the end. I think also an intellectual one and that was that. That for me the question about Marx Marx really belongs as a as a theorist. To school. Of historical progressives put the profits of progress. By talk about an introduction. Book. And I mention Marx and talk about his theories there. And it's precisely I think because he did see . The end of capitalism. As creating. Not something that was non western or that would reject the kinds of values. Industrial Society in the transformations that had taken place. But that would in a sense transcend them. Raise them to another level and Nabl. Large numbers of other people to enjoy who could not. If they believed could not enjoy them. Underway. Under the existing. Capitalist status quo. And that in the end I think Marx does belong to this. And does come that the. At it in a kind of odd way. To the end of this sort of liberal humanist tradition. That permeates his own views. About many of these kinds of issues here. And as we know there is a Marxist. Humanist tradition that does kind of emerge out of that Marxist. Point of

view here. Now Marx is going to become an important tool. I think. For those who want to talk about. Capitalist society. As declining. As degenerating he provides fuel for the argument.

In a way he also creates a kind of larger apocalyptic framework for this that the end of capitalist civilization. Is itself. Inevitable. There's a kind of inevitability. To these historical process sees that. A new order will necessarily arise from what happens after that collapse takes place.

And of course it also shares this other ingredient with the. With the kinds of cultural pessimists that I have talked about here and that is his tendency to see him and beings caught in these processes. As being in a sense. Essential a sort of helpless plex place. That history is a process that goes on regardless of how individuals play their parts. And how they see these kinds of events taking place. That is a cultural pessimists. And like the Marxist. Sees history is something that's done to people as opposed to seeing history as something in which individuals. Act on the world. On the basis of their assumptions and beliefs and.

That basic historical assumption is what I think that builds a strong. Bridge. A strong bridge between. Between those two.

Those two kinds of.

Yes. Very interesting such a chapter would be very ambiguous marks his legacy has been overly much so. Yeah I mean the Marxist I'd like to see as you say. Right there in that enlightening progressivist tradition. Indeed in a very utopian. Tradition that utopianism means that he has to transcend in a sense. The Western civilization as we have known it. And he has bonded to create a new kind of man. Which brings us right into the subject or this is a kind of marking to England as. Yes And not and into an anti. Western civilization. Tradition put it that I think it would have a need for a very powerful chapter.

Right but I have no legal center for us. You know if you're if you're born an airplane. You live your life in an airplane you're going to be very interested in theories. Crash it's just you know. And I think. Here in the West. We're conscious of the we are part of a civilization that is an enormously successful. And we look back and in the past and we see that there have been. Crashes. It's not out. I don't know heard of the loss of in cars over. Over the centuries that crashed. I wonder to what extent. You and in other civilizations not Western civilizations. There have been comparable. Theories of decline as I'm suggesting a theory of decline. Sort of. Part of human nature and inevitable part of being an AI civilization. Where you can say. Well. We've got up. What goes up must come down and there are a variety of ways which. We might come down and. So you have different. Intellectuals. Speculating on how this. Part of our civilization or other.

Well you know is inevitably doomed to collapse and sometimes their eyes. I mean. I don't know if it's necessary natural to human species but it does seem to be something that appears in almost every sophisticated culture or civilization that sense. I talk

about this in the introduction. In some detail that sense that the way things are our forebears did that it were a lot better.

You know. And that they were just a lot more. Better equipped than we are and really superior to all these other kinds of things that we've sort of watched this sort of ongoing decay. About it. Part of it may be. Just the way in which human beings I think experience change in their. Themselves as human beings. Certain kinds of physical powers. As time goes on there is this sort of sense that. You know what that the way one had lived before was with those kinds of powers to be able to to do things that. That you that you can't anymore as a kind of acquired certain kind of allure. To it. And it just becomes sort of transferred in talking about the ways in which we understand how groups. Work and interact. Says TS nations empires. And then two and then projected on to the sort of grander scheme of civilizations that somehow. Way. You know a link that's established by historical tradition that ties. Generations over hundreds of years. Even a millennia. Or more. And of course that's a part of a permanent part of the West. As well western ideas. From the ancients. Through the Middle Ages to the Reformation the whole notion of. Apocalyptic vision of the end of. End of the world all of these kinds of things reflect. Similar decline and kinds of ideas here. And in some cases generate a sense of that kind of goes with it. I think the difference though that columns. With the eighteenth century in which really with the Enlightenment. In your life and as the starting point for my book and some. Really. And it's also the starting point for this.

Sense of ambiguity about decline. The ambiguity that are built into the notion of hot weather history progressive decline. Is the idea that. Is that. That is that the. Is that the ultimate reality. To which. History. In our events in our lives are. To be held accountable. Is in the here and now. In a secular time. And that the. And that the with the realization and and the kind of transformation of our lives for the better. That lifts us out from the kind of. You know the sort of. Veil of tears which we find ourselves. The idea that that. That that kind of lifting out is something that takes place. Now in the future. This is what the idea of progress. Brings or likewise that. The collapse of the winding down. That goes with it is also something that takes place in the here and now. As opposed to something we look for a transcendent reality religious or religious escape. And break through to make this kind of transformation. This is the big change that comes in the nineteenth century. And the rejection on the one hand a reaction against the idea of progress. Things are getting better or getting worse. But all this sort of at the same time. But also at the same time. This feeling that. Yes things are getting worse. But I have a better idea of what we can do from here. Which is how the historical pessimist because turns into the cultural pessimist. That I can realize that greater idea. In the here and now by our neck the next sighting we create whether it's a Marxist utopia. Or whether it's a racial vitalist vision of the future. Or whatever kinds of. Whatever kinds of models models are going to be used to to explain that. Yeah. But they don't come up here.

I thought. Yeah. I'm Max great I just. It is there are some common reason or reasons why some groups latch on to this idea of decline. And others don't. Well that's a port in question I guess. Certain groups or certain individuals. In any case . Certainly from the point of view of people like Henry Adams and.

In this country and people like Jaco Burckhardt in Europe of the nineteenth century these are people for whom the big sweeping changes the nineteenth century. Really gave them a sense of displacement of the world have really changed in ways that where the world around them really become foreign to them. You know all these people suddenly. Surfacing. From the kind of the lower orders that they had never seen before the sort of Norma's increase. And sudden appearance. Of this sort of capitalist wealth.

Of a sort that they that they had not recognized or seen before. And certainly that sense of being displaced in one's own society. Finds itself makes it easier to latch onto explanations or rationalizations as to why this is taking place. But at the same time of course. The whole point is that the kind of paradox here because on the one hand your interpretation the changes in experience that is you're going through. And they have an impact on shaping your view of the society in which you live. But at the same time of course. The ways in which you interpret those things. Depend on the sumption to bring to it. From the very beginning here and. From my point of view from the point of view of what I'm talking about as far as modern culture. Go. How modern culture functions and has permeated by these decliners notions. As if this is in a sense there. Becomes a process of a kind of intellectual trickle down effect here of a kind of. Of a kind of cultural conditioning in which the terms of debate. And the ways in which we understand these issues are being constantly framed.

Constantly framed. Along those either historical pessimists deceptions or cultural pessimist assumptions. So no I don't think there's some kind of. You know natural mechanism that explains it because you can have displaced people in a society. Paper. Who don't have an inevitable decline and crept.

Quite the opposite. There isn't a sense. Instead there's an enormous influx of energy and engagement with that society. So it's. I don't know if there's any particular mechanism. That's at work here that. That. That brings people to it. It brings people to this notion of decline. But certainly you can see I think and I try to lay out on that. In the books what the consequences. What the consequences can be you know.

John Fund daily and I have two related question how did you get of exam like Robert Bork's slouching toward the more of your taxonomy more or less a cultural decliners. But he suggests returning to the present the jeremiad returning the principle to the west rejecting them at the West. Connector the second question is To what extent is multiculturalism. Not about race or culture but about idiology in the sense an idiology. Of western progressive the instrument of western progressive. To essentially balkanize. Into. Ethnic groups of peoples and then the sense was needed then of course is a centralization a new a leech a new clash that essentially rules the roost in the form of. Some form of utopianism there's got to what extent is this. Valid. That's an interesting point. Bork's book. I'm going to talk about Burke's book. That's first of all.

I am going to say. Simply this. And that that. When talking about these kinds of issues. Conservatives always have to be careful. And that is that there is when you start to use that vocabulary of decline ism and start bringing in these kinds of images and metaphors and begin to talk about the society and its institutions in these sorts of terms that you do lend yourself vulnerable to various other kinds of. More radical solutions and and and and. Proposed. Directions. For those. Those institutions here. And that in many ways. The same thing happened with with Paul Kennedy's book. To decline and fall of the great powers. That when you start talking about American society in terms of these decline that the only people who really in the end make happy. Are the people who are looking forward to that decline and to that end. Which is not to say there's nothing to worry about. That's not to say that. Work may not have valid points. About certain kinds of things that there are things to worry about and to be concerned about and to take action towards it. But I think that in some regards that attitude and. We've seen it happen in the nineteenth century. That that attitude of historical pessimism. Does create an environment in which these cultural pessimist solutions began to move. Began to move to the fore. As for your other question of regard to. Whether multiculturalism is not in fact a kind of statist. You know a kind of hidden statism. That's at work here. On the part of Western progressives. I suppose that's. There's a. There's an ingredient to that. That there is this kind of danger that where multiculturalism will lead us to a situation that you get in something like. You know the Empire Ottoman with the with the media law system in which you've got. Religious and ethnic minorities who are who are led by a form a community a ghettoised community. Headed by certain accepted leaders who are able to deal and serve as power brokers with the with the centralized power holders. And then what you get is this kind of. This close relationship then in which the centralized power. Distributes favors. To various. Of these ethnic groups. In exchange for obedience to the laws. There is I suppose some danger that that is what's at work and there may be some people who are aware of what's. Of what's taking place here.

But the. But the multi. But how. Multiculturalism itself views the West. And how the figures who are engaged in this kind of discussion. Is really what is really the issue that I find interesting and that I've been I've been trying to address here.

I got Richard Green. I want to look back on facts on you but the people of my current generation who started this sort of septic shock us. Says . Highly interactive as well I think is someone. I talk about him. Very briefly in the discussion about the French. Prophets of doom. And the kind of the background to what will happen later on in the twenty's and thirty's and. In Paris. Hear more of classic decline ists he says historical pessimists. You know all these other kinds of ways. And he's so again. This sort of. This sort of pessimism. A kind of undermining of self-confidence. In the French Republic or even in the possibility of the old his own political program being being. Coming into existence. Here there's no way in which. The French monarchy. Could come into the market that could come into existence and be one of us would not have recognised. And refused. He would turn to some other kind of political system instead.

But that kind of that sort of decline his view that refusal to participate in modern normal political institutions such as they existed in front.

Again played a part in creating an intellectual climate a climate. First among. Intellectuals on the right. But then later on of the intellectuals on the left. That again that western society. Is inevitably doomed and it's going to have to be overturned. And it in a sense that almost anything that takes its place is going to be better than what we've got last. Yeah . He said. I feel like it really explains why this time it's so different because even the Greeks weren't terribly sorry. I don't I. You know. Wish to criticize their own societies. Didn't. I mean. Did not sort of believe and. Sort of otherworldly recompense for what happens here . Which is where you say. Change and then one night in the eighteenth century or so I feel like . I don't really understand what he's changed so much that we would have to sort of. Vicious turning on our own society. I mean. How does the one explain the other. Oh. In terms of the vicious turning well. That could be. That's a slightly different point what I think. Let me try again. Trying to get out of this is how we should replace it as opposed to sort of depression. Something we like is this gone wrong. That's right. But don't forget the cultural pessimist is in the bag. At the end. He is building upon. Historical pessimist. Argument namely that the West is winding down. But the cultural Christmas is saying. There's something that lies beyond that not lies beyond in terms of a transcendent reality which is where you see they would differ from let's say a Christian or a Judeo Christian tradition or Plato. Or Socrates view. And that is that internal to the world is the way it is. That's all there is to it and if you are looking for a happiness if you are looking for virtue you have to move outside of that. But the cultural pessimist is saying no don't do that that's a lost cause anyway. It's an illusion. Instead. That last virtue. That sense of lost morality and lost values can be recovered in the here and now. Through. Secular historical process. And through political processes. And that's the key difference. Is that the cultural pessimist is building on the historical on this idea of decline. But he's creating a new progressive vision. To emerge out of it. A new progressive version. That's going to come. But which you see has to detach itself entirely from the moribund predecessor. The moribund prototype.

Linda Chavez: Thank you very much. I'd like to say a few words. To Professor Herman about your chapter on multiculturalism because one of the reasons that we were interested in having you here is the whole way in which multiculturalism has infected not just higher education which is where we read about it most often in where we see some of its most radical. Forms but. Multiculturalism in public schools. In the United States and. And notions that were once. The purview of intellectuals in ivory towers are now. Very much. The education of most schoolchildren in America today in these ideas of decline. And particularly the way in which multiculturalism. Plays into the ideas of. Decline in the. Profound anti-Americanism. That is sometimes found in these programs I think is something that I know concerns us here at the Center for Equal Opportunity. This whole idea that children. Must be indoctrinated in the notion of. The evils of the West and the. Failures of Western civilization. And the

way in which although many of the multiculturalists. Talk about inclusion. As. Their purpose and. Moving many children from from different racial and ethnic backgrounds into the mainstream of America. The actual doctrines that are promoted the actual materials that are used the actual models that are put up. Are often very much in the in a different direction and I think your book. Did an excellent job in in that chapter of. Talking about those themes I want to thank you again. Very much and thank all of you for coming and invite you again. To our next. Book Launch in which John do we have. We don't have a date yet set but you'll be getting invitations from assault thank you very much.

Thank you you know minute to look at the twenty second annual Washington antiquarian book fair. And later consumer advocate Ralph Nader talks about

The Ted K Archive

Arthur Herman
The Idea of Decline in Western History (Lecture)
March 18, 1997

<c-span.org/video/?79768-1/the-idea-decline-western-history>

www.thetedkarchive.com