

From Homer to the Unabomber

Declinists Across the Ages

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The Idea of Decline in Western History, by Arthur Herman. New York Free Press, 1997, 400 pp. \$30.00.

At one level, Arthur Herman's book is a marvelously efficient compendium of dismal predictions or resigned assessments of ongoing, imminent, inevitable, or just possibly avoidable political, social, economic, cultural, or racial declines by hundreds of very famous, less famous, or infamous thinkers, novelists, poets, and artists, starting with Homer and ending with the Unabomber. The efficiency derives from Herman's uncanny ability to compress the views of the likes of de Maistre, Schopenhauer, or Sidney Webb into a short paragraph or two, while disposing of many others in a single sentence, often a quotation.

Thus we find that, faced with the relentless advance of capitalism and its definition of human worth as net worth, the French Romantics Gautier, Stendhal, and Flaubert, like their English counterparts Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, and Southey ("profit and loss became the rule of conduct; in came calculation, and out went feeling"), became convinced that they were witnessing the moral decline of man, amid the ruination of the land itself by dark, satanic mills. Rousseau and Herder had been pessimistic even before industrialization, reacting to the Enlightenment's cold rationalism and its implied warrant for individual hedonism, which they saw as squeezing out all spontaneous emotion, self-expression, and altruism.

What Herman does for the Romantics he does for all other categories of declinists, from the political variety that goes back to Plato and includes America's own Henry and Brooks Adams (here at chapter length), to the physical degeneration school that starts with Cesare Lombroso (another chapter), the racial devitalization crackpots headed by Arthur de Gobineau (a further chapter), the economic worriers and fretters, and finally—the largest category of all—the sociocultural pessimists. The latter include the still highly influential Ferdinand Tönnies and Gustav von Schmoller, whose student W. E. B. Du Bois followed him in seeing communal and spiritual *Kultur* (including the "Negro soul") under deadly attack by *7.wilisation* (material advancement). Among their contemporary American exponents Herman lists Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Thomas Pynchon, Christopher Lasch, Jonathan Kozol, Garry Wills, Joseph Campbell, and at least two dozen others.

That is the sort of thing that makes a wonderfill compendium—distilled summaries, quotations, and lists that amount to a Western Civ. refresher course in one easy read. Moreover, Herman is not only lucid and graceful, but also supplies all the necessary bits of background as he goes along, asking little of the reader. This book is no mere cut-and-paste job of encyclopedia cullings, however. Far from a contrived display of learning, it is replete with throwaway lines that imply a deeper knowledge of many subjects than Herman, a historian at George Mason University, overtly deploys. But the author may find even this high praise unwelcome because, as he must know, the compilation of compendia, breviaries, and florilegia is the surest sign of cultural decline—by the fifth century virtually nothing else was being written by Romans, as the literate remnant desperately tried to package and preserve dissipating knowledge on sturdy parchment.

THE PERSONAL IS PHILOSOPHICAL

When it comes to explaining the oceans of pessimism surveyed, the book starts very well, only to inspire mounting doubts about what Herman is really telling readers. He writes as if he believed that pessimism is never warranted, and certainly fails to acknowledge the insights of the declinists he reviews so well. Herman begins by noting that projections of the aging process of individuals, from the full powers of maturity to inevitable decay, induce almost every traditional culture to look back longingly to a golden age when things were better ordered, including the human body. As usual, he has an excellent quotation, Ajax hurling a rock with one hand, “which the sturdiest youngster of our generation would have found difficult to lift with both hands,” from E. V. Rieu’s translation of *The Iliad*. Typically, Herman puts Homer, Hesiod, the Vedas, Confucian China, the ancient Egyptians, Aztecs, Zoroastrians, Lapps, Native Americans, medieval Icelanders, and Old Irish, as well as Genesis, in this category. The cyclical alternative of both the classical and Hellenistic Greeks, which sees rebirth and renewal following the final stage of decay, is also apt to induce pessimism up until that far prospect is attained. (Plato’s ideal state would have trapped its golden age by prohibiting change.)

Herman also provides a great number of failure-revenge explanations, which are at least plausible. De Gobineau, disappointed in his overweening literary ambitions in Balzac’s harshly competitive Paris of the 1830s, with nothing much in hand except aristocratic pretensions, blames his personal failure on the degeneration of the Aryan race, devitalized, he says, by a soft civilization and miscegenation with inferior southern races, in his long, crackpot-erudite *Essay on the Inequality of the Races* (1853). Oswald Spengler likewise had his high academic hopes dashed in 1903 when his University of Berlin thesis was initially rejected, suffered a nervous breakdown, hated his mediocre life of mere high school teaching, and in April 1918 finally published *The Decline of the West*, which conflated his personal failure with the decay of the entire civilization. Brooks Adams was traumatized by a bank failure that briefly threatened the family fortune (“like other affluent critics of capitalism, they were heavily invested in it”) and vented his indignation at plutocrats and city bosses in his *Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895).

Artists and intellectuals being by nature driven to seek fame, the inevitable obscurity of most of them generates vast amounts of disappointment, readily projected as pessimistic assessments of countries, races, eras, or whole civilizations. Herman duti-

fully collates many such cases, although to merit inclusion in his book all of these embittered failures must finally have achieved at least a modicum of fame, if only after their deaths.

A TRANSITIONAL SPECIES

Herman is less persuasive, and finally entirely unconvincing, because of his assumption, implicit in the search for an explanation, that all pessimistic predictions are simply wrong. He does not seem to recognize that farsighted thinkers can warn of a future less than wholly bright, or even terrible, for perfectly good reasons that owe nothing to their own physical decay, bitterness at personal failure, or simplistic projections of the lifecycle onto cultures and civilizations. He himself cites Friedrich von Schlegel's contemporary warning that the French Revolution had inaugurated a terrible new era of "unselfish crimes," in which "love of virtue" and belief in the perfectibility of man and society would inspire atrocities far worse than those of any conquering horde. Yet Herman writes as if unaware of how accurate von Schlegel's prediction has turned out to be, down to the Khmer Rouge—so far. One strand of German Romanticism found its most degraded expression in the death camps, but another tried all along to avert that evil, along with Stalin's and Mao's, with urgent, solidly argued, and utterly lucid warnings, all of which a progress-intoxicated world rejected as too pessimistic.



Likewise, in surveying the nineteenth-century German racial pessimists, Herman is efficient as always in summarizing the views of Ernst Haeckel, the German biologist who promoted Darwinism in Germany and was the founding father of “ecology” (his coinage), without recognizing Haeckel’s wider insights. Haeckel’s *The Riddle of the Universe* (1899), transcending its roots in biology, progresses by a series of simple yet profound arguments to show that the sharp disequilibrium between the technological progress of contemporary European civilization and its moral primitivism amid dogmatic religion, unhinged individualism, and assorted superstitions and taboos must lead to a political catastrophe. Only the revelation that humans are merely evolving vertebrates rather than nature’s masters and owners as “the image of God” can open the way to a new equilibrium with the natural world and all its living beings—the conventional wisdom of today’s Democrats and Republicans alike and of a growing proportion of humanity everywhere, from Swedish dentists to Thai farmers. But for Herman, Haeckel is simply a bad guy, partly because of his loathing for religion (actually, Haeckel merely detested the infernal certitudes of monotheistic religions) and partly because of his honorary chairmanship of the Society for Racial Hygiene, which advocated eugenics and euthanasia but which was not anti-Semitic. (Haeckel, as Herman acknowledges, contemptuously dismissed the racism of Wagner’s English son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain.) For the society’s founder Alfred Ploetz, all that mattered was that Jews and Aryans were physiologically identical.

THE OPTIMISTIC DECLINIST

That Herman has trouble with his Germans becomes evident in his factually accurate yet fundamentally misguided treatment of Nietzsche, perhaps the most optimistic of the declinists. Because many of Hermans subsequent declinists, including Adorno, Foucault, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Sartre, as well as battalions of American cultural critics down to the Unabomber, derived their better ideas directly or indirectly from Nietzsche, Hermans misconception is consequential for much of the book. Characteristically, Herman attributes Nietzsche's "loathing for the military" to a tumble off a caisson during his compulsory service as a student reserve officer in the Prussian army's field artillery. Yet Herman reproduces enough of Nietzsche's thought to show that the philosopher would have fiercely opposed the slavishness militarism demands, and its destructive consequences at the collective level, even if his military training had gone splendidly, with medals won for dashing charges and admiring young ladies swept off their feet.

The failure-revenge explanation does not apply in Nietzsche's case. The product of what was then the world's finest education, in 1869, at the astoundingly young age of 24, Nietzsche went straight from his studies at the University of Bonn and Leipzig to the philology chair at Basel to teach what was then the most important subject in the humanities, at a time and in a place when university professor was a most prestigious occupation, and not badly paid either. It was therefore as a recognized prodigy, a worldly success, and a popular lecturer to boot that Nietzsche set out on his quest.

At the level of the individual, Nietzsche saw authenticity of feeling and expression drowned by the routine insincerity, moralistic claptrap, and acquisitive compulsions of mass society under capitalism (and he never had the experience of being "networked" iqqos-style at casual social gatherings). But socialism was no better—just as materialistic and even more reliant on the state's enslaving mechanisms. And Nietzsche was far too realistic to accept Rousseau's "return to nature," which could only mean a peasant's life of squalid poverty.

At the collective level, Nietzsche could see with the naked eye the transformation of the German lands into an empire increasingly driven mad by a pervasive militarism such that eminent civilians would seek any excuse to prance about in their reserve uniforms as lowly lieutenants or captains, eagerly saluting any mediocrity of higher rank ("madness is rare among individuals; in entire nations it is common"). The Germans were afflicted more than most, earning Nietzsche's special contempt; their functional virtues (efficiency etc.) were becoming mechanistic vices, of which militarism was the most serious symptom. But the disease was modern Europe's fusion of mass society,

nationalism (“lunacy” for Nietzsche), and bureaucratic organization. All the pieces were there, ready to turn entire nations into war machines motivated by mass propaganda and armed by mass production to produce mass death, as Nietzsche’s mentor and friend Jacob Burckhardt had predicted. Having seen the machine at work as an ambulance orderly in the Franco-Prussian War, which featured the first repeating-fire massacres of infantry, Nietzsche was quite sure of the outcome: a devastating general war that would wreck Europe. Only the tactical details of World War I were missing from his prediction.

In the face of this catastrophe, most intellectuals were useless, in Nietzsche’s view. They kept celebrating the onward march of material progress instead of warning people that they were being turned into anonymous masses soon to be herded to slaughter. Only a new cultural elite of heroic individualists, “supermen” untrammelled by any imposed norm, might save Europe, by leading all who would follow, by argument, romance, poetry, and music, to spurn materialism, despise collective power, and seek self-expression, thus restoring personal authenticity and averting mass madness and war. Nietzsche did agree with the anti-Semites that there was a “Jewish problem” in Germany, but his solution was to eject the anti-Semites while assimilating the Jews.

It remains a great puzzle how the witty, teasing, seriously antimilitarist, antinationalist, and in some ways anti-German Nietzsche acquired the exact opposite reputation among Anglo-Saxons, becoming a hate figure in the British popular press during World War I. Even stranger is that Herman once again reflects discredit on Nietzsche by bringing up Hitler’s admiration for him—proof that Hitler had read only some Zarathustran purple passages in the tooled-leather sets of works that he gave as presents to the likes of Mussolini.

AUTHENTICITY TODAY

Throughout his book, Herman seeks to disprove the contention that today's pessimism, as opposed to our greatgrandparents' confident belief in progress, reflects the catastrophic evils of the twentieth century. In that aim, he amply succeeds. Where he fails is in his dismissive rejection of warnings whose validity has increased with the passage of time. For Herman, the loss of authenticity is a tiresome invention of spoiled thinkers. But what moved Nietzsche and influenced his followers is the process that starts with the unconscious absorption and use of meretricious language (from "Thank you for flying... airlines" to the now almost customary "I love you all" of public speech) and ends with the outright loss of one's own authentic, individual humanity, a process of depersonalization. Having lied all day at the shop or office in order to sell goods, services, or oneself, the lying continues after hours for more effective "networking," then persists at home with near and dear by sheer habit, until it finally reaches the point of lying to oneself. As Nietzsche was first to note, modern mass societies are full of people who do not know who they are or what they want. That much follows almost inevitably from modernity's demolition of the certitudes of traditional communities and of naive popular religion along with modernity's accursed gift of self-consciousness for all. For those who lack the ability of the "superman" to fearlessly confront both the vacuity and the brevity of life, a semiconscious existence of play-acting one role after another is the best alternative. But it does leave one vulnerable to manipulative enlistments by acquisitive compulsions, fads, and fashionable cant if not by ferocious ideologies, dictators, or cults (while it is the panic induced by the incipient loss of inherited certitudes that fuels Islamic as well as all other religious fundamentalisms).

The process of depersonalization, by the internalization of insincere and self-serving language, is visibly complete in the modern TV politician, who evokes intimate personal tragedies in public to falsely claim genuine feelings that would impose a complete silence if they were actually felt. Or is it only this reviewer who saw in the San Diego and Chicago party conventions the repeated attempts of humanoid robots to simulate an authentic humanity?

The Ted K Archive

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