

An Optimist's Lament

Things aren't so bad, says the author, but pessimism is more popular than ever

Fareed Zakaria

March 30, 1997

The Idea of Decline in Western History

By Arthur Herman. 521 pp. New York: The Free Press. \$30.

In an essay on Paul Kennedy's "Rise and Fall of the Great Powers," Samuel P. Huntington coined the term "declinists" to describe writers who asserted that things were getting worse. The other possible variation on "decline" was "decliners," but, Mr. Huntington said, while more felicitous it gave the impression that the author rather than his subject was in decline. In fact, it's the other way around; as every journalist knows, bad news sells. Now Arthur Herman has written a brisk survey of declinism from Sophocles to the Unabomber, outlining the long shadow of Western pessimism.

Mr. Herman, an adjunct professor of history at George Mason University and coordinator of the Western civilization program at the Smithsonian Institution, is no mere chronicler. His aim is to discredit declinism: "While intellectuals have been predicting the imminent collapse of Western civilization for more than 150 years," he writes in the introduction to "The Idea of Decline in Western History," "its influence has grown faster during that period than at any time in history." He places the worry warts of today, from Al Gore with his "eco-pessimism" to Robert Bork with his cultural gloom and doom, in a long, distinguished and misguided Western tradition. From Homer's Ajax, who picked up with one hand a stone that "the sturdiest youngster of our generation would have found difficult to lift with both," Western thought has been full of intimations of an earlier, better time. Hesiod wrote of a golden age, which gave way to a silver, a bronze and finally an iron age. Polybius theorized that political systems spiral downward over time. Such stories can be found in the myths and histories of every great civilization. China and India have their own tales of golden ages when the gods walked the earth. Western history is unusual not for its ancient notions of decline but for its modern theories of progress, born in the Enlightenment and flourishing during the 19th century.

These notions of progress gave rise to new and quite different assertions of decline. It is these theories that Mr. Herman focuses on, despite his title's broader claim. His story begins in earnest in the mid-19th century with writers like Arthur de Gobineau, who, popularizing the new "science" of race, regarded as tragic but inevitable the contamination of the Aryan race by its contact with Latins, Gauls and other "lower orders." ("Aryan" was a word that originally described ancient Indians — "Arya" is Sanskrit for "man of honor" — but, for complicated and amusing reasons, it was soon appropriated to mean Germanic or Anglo-Saxon.)

Mr. Herman devotes most of the book to the period from approximately 1870 to 1970, encompassing philosopher-pessimists like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, cultural pessimists like Henry Adams and Brooks Adams and historian-pessimists like Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. He details two current strands of declinism, devoting chapters to multiculturalism, which he sees as indebted to the anti-Western racialist writings of thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, and eco-pessimism, which follows in a long train of Romantic fiction and commentary in which man is the despoiler of a once-beautiful and harmonious earth.

Mr. Herman handles his sprawling subject with intelligence and ease, neatly summarizing complex philosophical arguments, adding biographical detail where relevant and maintaining a narrative of sorts. That last proves the most difficult because, while opinionated enough in his introduction and afterword, he seems to want the body of the book to speak for itself. But it doesn't, and I for one wish that he had got in there more often and argued with the intellectuals whose writings he describes. That would have made for more interesting reading but, more important, it would have given an intellectual framework to an otherwise unwieldy group of writers and topics. What, on the face of it, does Henry Adams have to do with the Unabomber?

A lot, actually. For the last 150 years, the Western discussion of decline has centered on one issue — capitalism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, otherwise so different, were moved by the same fear, that modern bourgeois society had caused dislocation, alienation and mediocrity. The left tended to be more concerned with the rise of mass poverty and inequality, the right with the waning of patrician society and its standards; the solutions they proposed were different but they agreed on the problem — industrial capitalism. Indeed, reading 19th-century cultural conservatives like Thomas Carlyle or John Ruskin, one is not sure whether they were monarchists or Marxists; in truth they were a bit of both.

Du Bois's criticism of Western society drew on these very themes. His most influential work, "The Souls of Black Folk," makes the distinction, common among German critics of the day, between Kultur and Zivilisation, the first the authentic voice of the people, the second a decadent artifice. Du Bois's concerns mirror the German concept of the Volk. American slavery, in this view, was just one more degrading aspect of Western civilization. When traveling in Africa, Du Bois was impressed by its preindustrial simplicity, its absence of bourgeois standards in work, dress and behavior. "We are the supermen who sit idly by and laugh and look at civilization," he wrote. "We, who frankly want the bodies of our mates and conjure no blush to our bronze cheeks when we own it."

If this sounds odd or repellent, that is, of course, the point. Mr. Herman culls together embarrassing quotations from his rogues' gallery, often showing the declinists to be petty racists or people embittered by some personal failure. This does not mar his book, because on the whole he provides representative portraits of his subjects, some of whom were nasty characters. But Mr. Herman does not seem to recognize that in one fundamental sense they were right. Capitalism was and is a destructive and revolutionary phenomenon. It utterly transformed economic, social and political arrangements that had endured for millennia. It leveled European feudalism and aristocracy, then proceeded, in this century, to destroy statism, both fascist and Communist. It has created a dynamic, materialistic and dominating global culture with an aspiring middle class at its helm.

Capitalism, in other words, has created the world as we know it and left behind all serious competitors. Classical conservatism, once the most powerful critique of capitalism, doesn't even exist anymore. There is no political movement in the West extolling

divine rights, landed aristocracies and organic society. Today's so-called cultural conservatives are modern-day Victorians, who want people to be rich but also good — a thoroughly bourgeois idea. (The upper classes always disdained what they called middle-class morality.)

The left, for its part, typically has criticized capitalism, not for creating wealth but rather for not creating enough of it, and distributing it inequitably. Recall that Lenin thought one of Communism's chief virtues lay in its certain ability to out-produce capitalism. That criticism, to quote Leon Trotsky, now lies in the dustbin of history. Around the world, nations recognize that some variation of free-market economics is the only enduring path to growth.

With serious alternatives exhausted, what we are now left with is a collection of anticapitalist impulses and attitudes, which mix and match old complaints from the left and the right. They take the form of worrying about the tackiness of capitalism, its erosion of community life, its soul-deadening materialism, its leveling of high culture and so on. Some of these concerns are legitimate — we are certainly not living at a cultural or esthetic high point — but beneath them lurks a familiar romanticizing of the world as it is imagined to have existed before rapacious capitalism and its ideological handmaiden, individualism, got to it.

We forget how squalid was the life of rural peasants, who around the world still jump at the chance to escape their coherent, organic lives; how stifling those warm, fuzzy communities of yore really were; how limited was that world of high culture and patrician society (a nice life if you could get it!). Above all, we forget how the rise of capitalism and Enlightenment liberalism freed up the life of the ordinary human being. Mr. Herman concludes by noting that “the Middle Ages had given that awesome power of directing the fate of the individual to God and His representatives on earth — popes and kings... The Enlightenment had posed the really revolutionary question: What if society ... is made up of individual organisms, each with the power to more or less shape his own destiny?” Even to ask this question is surely a great advance.

Fareed Zakaria is the managing editor of Foreign Affairs.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



Fareed Zakaria

An Optimist's Lament

Things aren't so bad, says the author, but pessimism is more popular than ever

March 30, 1997

nytimes.com/books/97/03/30/reviews/970330.30zakerit.html

www.thetedkarchive.com