

# DECADENCE

*HENRY SIDGWICK MEMORIAL  
LECTURE*

by  
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I must begin what I have to say with a warning and an apology. I must warn you that the present essay makes no pretence to be an adequate treatment of some compact and limited theme; but rather resembles those wandering trains of thought, where we allow ourselves the luxury of putting wide-ranging questions, to which our ignorance forbids any confident reply. I apologise for adopting a course which thus departs in some measure from familiar precedent. I admit its perils. But it is just possible that when a subject, or group of subjects, is of great inherent interest, even a tentative, and interrogative, treatment of it may be worth attempting.

My subject, or at least my point of departure, is Decadence. I do not mean the sort of decadence often attributed to certain phases of artistic or literary development, in which an overwrought technique, straining to express sentiments too subtle or too morbid, is deemed to have supplanted the direct inspiration of an earlier and a simpler age. Whether these autumnal glories, these splendours touched with death, are recurring phenomena in the literary cycle: whether, if they be, they are connected with other forms of decadence, may be questions well worth asking and answering. But they are not the questions with which I am at present concerned. The decadence respecting which I wish to put questions is not literary or artistic, it is political and national. It is the decadence which attacks, or is alleged to attack, great communities and historic civilisations: which is to societies of men

what senility is to man, and is often, like senility, the precursor and the cause of final dissolution.

It is curious how deeply imbedded in ordinary discourse are traces of the conviction that childhood, maturity, and old age, are stages in the corporate, as they are in the individual, life. “A young and vigorous nation,” “a decrepit and moribund civilisation”—phrases like these, and scores of others containing the same implication, come as trippingly from the tongue as if they suggested no difficulty and called for no explanation. To Macaulay (unless I am pressing his famous metaphor too far) it seemed natural that ages hence a young country like New Zealand should be flourishing, but not less natural that an old country like England should have decayed. Berkeley, in a well-known stanza, tells how the drama of civilisation has slowly travelled westwards to find its loftiest development, but also its final catastrophe, in the New World. While every man who is weary, hopeless, or disillusioned talks as if he had caught these various diseases from the decadent epoch in which he was born.

But why *should* civilisations thus wear out and great communities decay? and what evidence is there that in fact they do? These questions, though I cannot give to them any conclusive answers, are of much more than a merely theoretic interest. For if current modes of speech take decadence more or less for granted, with still greater confidence do they speak of Progress as assured. Yet if both are real they can hardly be studied apart, they must evidently limit and qualify each other in actual experience, and they cannot be isolated in speculation.

Though antiquity, Pagan and Christian, took a different view, it seems easier, *a priori*, to understand Progress than Decadence.

Even if the former be limited, as presumably it is, by the limitation of human faculty, we should expect the ultimate boundary to be capable of indefinite approach, and we should *not* expect that any part of the road towards it, once traversed, would have to be retraced. Even in the organic world, decay and death, familiar though they be, are phenomena that call for scientific explanation. And Weismann has definitely asked how it comes about that the higher organisms grow old and die, seeing that old age and death are not inseparable characteristics of living protoplasm, and that the simplest organisms suffer no natural decay, perishing, when they do perish, by accident, starvation, or specific disease.

The answer he gives to his own question is that the death of the individual is so useful to the race, that Natural Selection has, in all but the very lowest species, exterminated the potentially immortal.

One is tempted to enquire, whether this ingenious explanation could be so modified as to apply not merely to individuals but to communities. Is it needful for the cause of civilisation as a whole, that the organised embodiment of each particular civilisation, if and when its free development is arrested, should make room for younger and more vigorous competitors? And if so can we find in Natural Selection the mechanism by which the principle of decay and dissolution shall be so implanted in the very nature of human associations that a due succession among them shall always be maintained?

To this second question the answer must, I think, be in the negative. The struggle for existence between different races and different societies has admittedly played a great part in social development. But to extend Weismann's idea from the organic to the social world, would imply a prolonged competition between groups of

communities in which decadence was the rule, and groups in which it was not;—ending in the survival of the first, and the destruction of the second. The groups whose members suffered periodical decadence and dissolution would be the fittest to survive: just as, on Weismann's theory, those species gain in competitive efficiency whom death has unburdened of the old.

Few will say that in the petty fragment of human history which alone is open to our inspection, there is satisfactory evidence of any such long drawn process. Some may even be disposed to ask whether there is adequate evidence of such a phenomenon as decadence at all. And it must be acknowledged that the affirmative answer should be given with caution. Evidently we must not consider a diminution of national power, whether relative or absolute, as constituting by itself a proof of national decadence. Holland is not decadent because her place in the hierarchy of European Powers is less exalted than it was two hundred and fifty years ago. Spain was not necessarily decadent at the end of the seventeenth century because she had exhausted herself in a contest far beyond her resources either in money or in men. It would, I think, be rash even to say that Venice was decadent at the end of the eighteenth century, though the growth of other Powers, and the diversion of the great trade routes, had shorn her of wealth and international influence. These are misfortunes which in the sphere of sociology correspond to accident or disease in the sphere of biology. And what we are concerned to know is whether in the sphere of sociology there is also anything corresponding to the decay of old age—a decay which may be hastened by accident or disease, which must be ended by accident or disease, but is certainly to be distinguished from both.

However this question should be answered the cases I have cited are sufficient to shew where the chief difficulty of the enquiry lies. Decadence, even if it be a reality, never acts in isolation. It is always complicated with, and often acts through, other more obvious causes. It is always therefore possible to argue that to these causes, and not to the more subtle and elusive influences collectively described as 'decadence,' the decline and fall of great communities is really due.

Yet there are historic tragedies which (as it seems to me) do most obstinately refuse to be thus simply explained. It is in vain that historians enumerate the public calamities which preceded, and no doubt contributed to, the final catastrophe. Civil dissensions, military disasters, pestilences, famines, tyrants, tax-gatherers, growing burdens, and waning wealth—the gloomy catalogue is unrolled before our eyes, yet somehow it does not in all cases wholly satisfy us: we feel that some of these diseases are of a kind which a vigorous body politic should easily be able to survive, that others are secondary symptoms of some obscurer malady, and that in neither case do they supply us with the full explanations of which we are in search.

Consider for instance the long agony and final destruction of Roman Imperialism in the West, the most momentous catastrophe of which we have historic record. It has deeply stirred the imagination of mankind, it has been the theme of great historians, it has been much explained by political philosophers, yet who feels that either historians or philosophers have laid bare the inner workings of the drama? Rome fell, and great was the fall of it. But why it fell, by what secret mines its defences were breached, and what made its garrison so faint-hearted and ineffectual—this is not so clear.

In order to measure adequately the difficulty of the problem let us abstract our minds from historical details and compare the position of the Empire about the middle of the second century, with its position in the middle of the third, or again at the end of the fourth, and ask of what forces history gives us an account, sufficient in these periods to effect so mighty a transformation. Or, still better, imagine an observer equipped with our current stock of political wisdom, transported to Rome in the reign of Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius, and in ignorance of the event, writing letters to the newspapers on the future destinies of the Empire. What would his forecast be?

We might suppose him to examine, in the first place, the military position of the State, its probable enemies, its capacities for defence. He would note that only on its eastern boundary was there an organised military Power capable of meeting Rome on anything like equal terms, and this only in the regions adjacent to their common frontier. For the rest he would discover no civilised enemy along the southern boundary to the Atlantic or along its northern boundary from the Black Sea to the German Ocean. Warlike tribes indeed he would find in plenty: difficult to crush within the limits of their native forests and morasses, formidable it may be in a raid, but without political cohesion, military unity, or the means of military concentration;—embarrassing therefore rather than dangerous. If reminded of Varus and his lost legions, he would ask of what importance, in the story of a world-power could be the loss of a few thousand men surprised at a distance from their base amid the entanglements of a difficult and unknown country. Never, it would seem, was Empire more fortunately circumstanced for purposes of home defence.

But (it might be thought) the burden of securing frontiers of such length, even against merely tribal assaults, though easy from a strictly military point of view, might prove too heavy to be long endured. Yet the military forces scattered through the Roman Empire, though apparently adequate in the days of her greatness would, according to modern ideas, seem hardly sufficient for purposes of police, let alone defence. An army corps or less was deemed enough to preserve what are now mighty kingdoms, from internal disorder and external aggression. And if we compare with this the contributions, either in the way of money or of men, exacted from the territories subject to Rome before the Empire came into being, or at any period of the world's history since it dissolved away, the comparison must surely be entirely in favour of the Empire.

But burdens which seem light, if measured by area, may be heavy if measured by ability to pay. Yet when has ability to pay been greater in the regions bordering the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean than under the Roman Empire? Travel round it in imagination, eastward from the Atlantic coast of Morocco till returning westward you reach the head of the Adriatic Gulf, and you will have skirted a region, still of immense natural wealth, once filled with great cities, and fertile farms, better governed during the Empire than it has ever been governed since (at least till Algeria became French and Egypt British); including among its provinces what were great states before the Roman rule, and have been great states since that rule decayed, divided by no international jealousies, oppressed by no fear of conquest, enterprising, cultured. Remember that to estimate its area of taxation and recruiting you must add to these regions Bulgaria, Servia, much of Austria and Bavaria, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy,



France, Spain, and most of Britain, and you have conditions favourable to military strength and economic prosperity rarely equalled in the modern world and never in the ancient.

Our observer however might, very rightly, feel that a far-spreading Empire like that of Rome, including regions profoundly differing in race, history and religion, would be liable to other dangers than those which arise from mere external aggression. One of the first questions, therefore, which he would be disposed to ask, is whether so heterogeneous a state was not in perpetual danger of dissolution through the disintegrating influence of national sentiments. He would learn probably, with a strong feeling of surprise, that with the single exception of the Jews, the constituent nations, once conquered, were not merely content to belong to the Empire, but could scarcely imagine themselves doing anything else: that the Imperial system appealed, not merely to the material needs of the component populations, but also to their imagination and their loyalty; that Gaul, Spain, and Britain, though but recently forced within the pale of civilisation, were as faithful to the Imperial ideal as the Greek of Athens or the Hellenised Orientals of Syria; and that neither historic memories, nor local patriotism, neither disputed succession, nor public calamities, nor administrative divisions, ever really shook the sentiment in favour of Imperial Unity. There might be more than one Emperor: but there could only be one Empire. Howsoever our observer might disapprove of the Imperial system he would therefore have to admit that the Empire, with all its shortcomings, its absolutism and its bureaucracy, had solved more successfully than any government, before or since, the problem of devising a scheme which equally satisfied the sentiments of East and West; which respected local feelings, encouraged local government; in which the Celt, the

Iberian, the Berber, the Egyptian, the Asiatic, the Greek, the Illyrian, the Italian were all at home, and which, though based on conquest, was accepted by the conquered as the natural organisation of the civilised world.

Rome had thus unique sources of strength. What sources of weakness would our observer be likely to detect behind her imposing exterior? The diminution of population is the one which has (rightly I think) most impressed historians: and it is difficult to resist the evidence, either of the fact, or of its disastrous consequences. I hesitate indeed to accept without qualification the accounts given us of the progressive decay of the native Italian stock from the days of the Gracchi to the disintegration of the Empire in the West: and when we read how the dearth of men was made good (in so far as it was made good) by the increasing inflow of slaves and adventurers from every corner of the known world, one wonders *whose* sons they were who, for three centuries and more, so brilliantly led the van of modern European culture, as it emerged from the darkness of the early Middle Ages. Passing by such collateral issues, however, and admitting depopulation to have been both real and serious, we may well ask whether it was not the result of Roman decadence rather than its cause, the symptom of some deep-seated social malady, not its origin. We are not concerned here with the aristocracy of Rome, nor even with the people of Italy. We are concerned with the Empire. We are not concerned with a passing phase or fashion, but with a process which seems to have gone on with increasing rapidity, through good times as well as bad, till the final cataclysm. A local disease might have a local explanation, a transient one might be due to a chance coincidence. But what can we say of a disease which was

apparently co-extensive with Imperial civilisation in area, and which exceeded it in duration?

I find it hard to believe that either a selfish aversion to matrimony or a mystical admiration for celibacy, though at certain periods the one was common in Pagan and the other in Christian circles, were more than elements in the complex of causes by which the result was brought about. Like the plagues which devastated Europe in the second and third centuries, they must have greatly aggravated the evil, but they are hardly sufficient to account for it. Nor yet can we find an explanation of it in the discouragement, the sense of impending doom, by which men's spirits were oppressed long before the Imperial power began visibly to wane, for this is one of the things which, if historically true, does itself most urgently require explanation.

It may be however that our wandering politician would be too well grounded in Malthusian economics to regard a diminution of population as in itself an overwhelming calamity. And if he were pressed to describe the weak spots in the Empire of the Antonines he would be disposed, I think, to look for them on the ethical rather than on the military, the economic, or the strictly political sides of social life. He would be inclined to say, as in effect Mr Lecky does say, that in the institution of slavery, in the brutalities of the gladiatorial shows, in the gratuitous distribution of bread to the urban mobs, are to be found the corrupting influences which first weakened and then destroyed the vigour of the State.

I confess that I cannot easily accept this analysis of the facts. As regards the gladiatorial shows, even had they been universal throughout the Empire, and had they flourished more rankly as its power declined, I should still have questioned the propriety of

attributing too far-reaching effects to such a cause. The Romans were brutal while they were conquering the world: its conquest enabled them to be brutal with ostentation; but we must not measure the ill consequences of their barbaric tastes by the depth of our own disgusts, nor assume the Gothic invasions to be the natural and fitting Nemesis of so much spectacular shedding of innocent blood.

As for the public distributions of corn, one would wish to have more evidence as to its social effects. But even without fully accepting the theory of the latest Roman historian, who believes that, under the then prevailing conditions of transport, no very large city could exist in Antiquity, if the supply of its food were left to private enterprise, we cannot seriously regard this practice, strange as it seems to us, as an important element in the problem. Granting for the sake of argument that it demoralised the mob of Rome, it must be remembered that Rome was not the Empire, nor did the mob of Rome govern the Empire, as once it had governed the Republic.

Slavery is a far more important matter. The magnitude of its effects on ancient societies, difficult as these are to disentangle, can hardly be exaggerated. But with what plausibility can we find in it the cause of Rome's decline, seeing that it was the concomitant also of its rise? How can that which in Antiquity was common to every state, have this exceptional and malign influence upon one? It would not in any case be easy to accept such a theory; but surely it becomes impossible when we bear in mind the enormous improvement effected under the Empire both in the law and the practice of slavery. Great as were its evils, they were diminishing evils—less ruinous as time went on to the character of the master, less painful and degrading to the slave. Who can believe that this

immemorial custom could, in its decline, destroy a civilisation, which, in its vigour, it had helped to create?

Of course our observer would see much in the social system he was examining which he would rightly regard as morally detestable and politically pernicious. But the real question before him would not be 'are these things good or bad?' but 'are these things getting better or getting worse?' And surely in most cases he would be obliged to answer 'getting better.' Many things moreover would come under his notice fitted to move his admiration in a much less qualified manner. Few governments have been more anxious to foster an alien and higher culture, than was the Roman Government to foster Greek civilisation. In so far as Rome inherited what Alexander conquered, it carried out the ideal which Alexander had conceived. In few periods have the rich been readier to spend of their private fortunes on public objects. There never was a community in which associations for every purpose of mutual aid or enjoyment sprang more readily into existence. There never was a military monarchy less given to wars of aggression. There never was an age in which there was a more rapid advance in humanitarian ideals, or a more anxious seeking after spiritual truth. There was much discussion, there was, apart from politics, but little intolerance. Education was well endowed, and its professors held in high esteem. Physical culture was cared for. Law was becoming scientific. Research was not forgotten. What more could be reasonably expected?

According to our ordinary methods of analysis it is not easy to say what more *could* be reasonably expected. But plainly much more was required. In a few generations from the time of which I am speaking the Empire lost its extraordinary power of assimilating alien and barbaric elements. It became too feeble either to absorb

or to expel them: and the immigrants who in happier times might have bestowed renewed vigour on the commonwealth, became, in the hour of its decline, a weakness and a peril. Poverty grew as population shrank. Municipal office, once so eagerly desired, became the most cruel of burdens. Associations connected with industry or commerce, which began by freely exchanging public service for public privilege, found their members subjected to ever increasing obligations, for the due performance of which they and their children were liable in person and in property. Thus while Christianity, and the other forces that made for mercy, were diminishing the slavery of the slave, the needs of the Bureaucracy compelled it to trench ever more and more upon the freedom of the free. It was each man's duty (so ran the argument) to serve the commonwealth: he could best serve the commonwealth by devoting himself to his calling if it were one of public necessity: this duty he should be required under penalties to perform, and to devote if necessary to its performance, labour to the limits of endurance, fortune to the last shilling, and family to the remotest generation. Through this crude experiment in socialism, the civilised world seemed to be rapidly moving towards a system of universal caste, imposed by no immemorial custom, supported by no religious scruple, but forced on an unwilling people by the Emperor's edict and the executioner's lash.

These things have severally and collectively been regarded as the causes why in the West the Imperial system so quickly crumbled into chaos. And so no doubt they were. But they obviously require themselves to be explained by causes more general and more remote; and what were these? If I answer as I feel disposed to answer—Decadence—you will properly ask how the unknown becomes less unknown merely by receiving a name. I reply that if

there be indeed subtle changes in the social tissues of old communities which make them, as time goes on, less resistant to the external attacks and the internal disturbances by which all communities are threatened, overt recognition of the fact is a step in advance. We have not an idea of what 'life' consists in, but if on that account we were to abstain from using the term, we should not be better but worse equipped for dealing with the problems of physiology; while on the other hand if we could translate life into terms of matter and motion to-morrow, we should still be obliged to use the word in order to distinguish the material movements which constitute life or exhibit it, from those which do not. In like manner we are ignorant of the inner character of the cell changes which produce senescence. But should we be better fitted to form a correct conception of the life-history of complex organisms if we refused to recognise any cause of death but accident or disease? I admit, of course, that the term 'decadence' is less precise than 'old age': as sociology deals with organisms far less definite than biology. I admit also that it explains nothing. If its use is to be justified at all, the justification must depend not on the fact that it supplies an explanation, but on the fact that it rules out explanations which are obvious but inadequate. And this may be a service of some importance. The facile generalisations with which we so often season the study of dry historic fact; the habits of political discussion which induce us to catalogue for purposes of debate the outward signs that distinguish (as we are prone to think) the standing from the falling state, hide the obscurer, but more potent, forces which silently prepare the fate of empires. National character is subtle and elusive; not to be expressed in statistics nor measured by the rough methods which suffice the practical moralist or statesman. And when through an ancient and still powerful state there spreads a mood of deep discouragement, when

the reaction against recurring ills grows feebler, and the ship rises less buoyantly to each succeeding wave, when learning languishes, enterprise slackens, and vigour ebbs away, then, as I think, there is present some process of social degeneration, which we must perforce recognise, and which, pending a satisfactory analysis, may conveniently be distinguished by the name of ‘decadence.’

I am well aware that though the space I have just devoted to the illustration of my theme provided by Roman history is out of all proportion to the general plan of this address, yet the treatment of it is inadequate and perhaps unconvincing. But those who are most reluctant to admit that decay, as distinguished from misfortune, may lower the general level of civilisation, can hardly deny that in many cases that level may for indefinite periods shew no tendency to rise. If decadence be unknown, is not progress exceptional? Consider the changing politics of the unchanging East<sup>11</sup>. Is it not true that there, while wars and revolutions, dynastic and religious, have shattered ancient states and brought new ones into being, every community, as soon as it has risen above the tribal and nomad condition, adopts with the rarest exceptions a form of government which, from its very generality in Eastern lands, we habitually call an ‘oriental despotism’? We may crystallise and re-crystallise a soluble salt as often as we please, the new crystals will always resemble the old ones. The crystals, indeed, may be of different sizes, their component molecules may occupy different positions within the crystalline structure, but the structure itself will be of one immutable pattern. So it is, or seems to be, with these oriental states. They rise, in turn, upon the ruins of their predecessors, themselves predestined to perish by a like fate. But whatever their origin or history, they are always either autocracies or aggregations of autocracies; and no differences of race, of creed,



of language seem sufficient to vary the violent monotony of their internal history. In the eighteenth century theorists were content to attribute the political servitude of the Eastern world to the unscrupulous machinations of tyrants and their tools. And such explanations are good as far as they go. But this, in truth, is not very far. Intrigue, assassination, ruthless repression, the whole machinery of despotism supply particular explanations of particular incidents. They do not supply the general explanation of the general phenomenon. They tell you how this ruler or that obtained absolute power. They do not tell you why every ruler is absolute. Nor can I furnish the answer. The fact remains that over large and relatively civilised portions of the world popular government is profoundly unpopular, in the sense that it is no natural or spontaneous social growth. Political absolutism not political freedom is the familiar weed of the country. Despots change but despotism remains: and if through alien influences, like those exercised by Greek cities in Asia, or by British rule in India, the type is modified, it may well be doubted whether the modification could long survive the moment when its sustaining cause was withdrawn.

Now it would almost seem as if in lands where this political type was normal a certain level of culture (not of course the same in each case) could not permanently be overpassed. If under the excitement of religion or conquest, or else through causes more complicated and more obscure, this limit has sometimes been left behind, reaction has always followed, and decadence set in. Many people indeed, as I have already observed, take this as a matter of course. It seems to them the most natural thing in the world that the glories of the Eastern Khalifate should decay, and that the Moors in Morocco should lose even the memory of the learning and the

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