The Idea of Decline in Western History by Arthur Herman

Benny- Recognizing your interest in modern apocalyptic thought I’ve sent these posts from our discussion group.  Central to Herman’s tracing of historical narratives is the idea of coercive outside intervention to save. This idea can be found in writings as ancient as Zoroaster’s hymns- that the great good power will intervene to purge the degraded world with fire and restore the lost paradise (the original perfection). This idea still energizes modern socialist and environmental narratives.

Its helpful to recognize these core themes of the old narratives (original purity, subsequent Fall and ongoing decline) that have shaped human consciousness for millennia. As in my own experience under Bill Rees back in the early 1990s, when you do not fully recognize the nature of the old worldview/narrative that you hold (and what you may be trying to abandon), you then tend to repeatedly re-engage similar belief systems that are simply a rehash of these ancient apocalyptic beliefs. Any new narrative would counter the old perfect origin/subsequent Fall and decline story with a new story that expresses reality as we now know it- that there never was any original purity or paradise; that humanity throughout its history has been gradually progressing from something more barbaric toward something better and more humane. And the world is being saved, just as it long has been, by people just like ourselves going about our daily rounds trying to create something better for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

The discussion posts are just below. If you  have already read Herman’s book, then ignore this.

Here are some quotes and paraphrased summaries to give some flavour of Arthur Herman’s detailed, dense portrayal of the history of ideas of decline (The Idea of Decline in Western History).

Herman states that we live in an era in which pessimism has become the  norm. Any title with ‘crisis’ in it will sell. Contemporary pessimism embraces the widespread assumption of impending exhaustion of natural resources, end of abundance, imperial overstretch of Western influence and so much more that is in decline and becoming worse. He recognizes that facts alone do not make or break such conclusions. Pessimism and optimism are attitudes that people bring to events, not conclusions that arise from analysis of facts. The prevailing gloom is more of an ideological assumption based on selected facts. Environmental degradation is a leading example  here of modern pessimism. Gore’s Earth in the Balance is offered as an example. The Unabomber apparently had a well worn copy of Gore’s book in his shack and shared the vision of decline and acted to bring it about. This modern gloom and pessimism over the supposed decline of the West has roots in past centuries that Herman traces in detail.

He notes the idea of decline has two distinct traditions- those who dread the coming collapse of society and those who look forward to it with glee. Even Joseph Campbell was among modern intellectuals who shared this vision of decline.

Modern society is viewed by declinists as greedily materialistic, spiritually bankrupt, and devoid of human values. Modern people in the declinist’s view are always displaced, rootless, psychologically scarred, and isolated from one another. Demoralized.

This radical vision of decline Herman calls cultural pessimism. The modern world and modern man are trapped in a process of deterioration, exhaustion and inevitable collapse. Cultural pessimism is an attack on modern Western culture that predates and transcends any Marxist or socialist creed. Past centuries shared the same vision of capitalist civilization as doomed to self-destruction. And inevitable doom hovers over the products and achievements of the Western model until “some entirely new redemptive order arises”. Cultural pessimism is a salvation mythology and ideology. According to Herman, it is a crabbed and self-limiting view of modernity and change.

He also notes that paradoxically it includes a message of hope and this illustrates the salvation orientation of pessimistic apocalyptic views. “The cultural pessimist assures us that when our corrupt modern society has finally ruined itself and vanishes, something better will replace it. This new order...will involve the demolition of Western culture as a totality”. It may take the shape of the Unabomber’s radical environmental utopia. It will be anti-Western.

Cultural pessimists view bad news as good news. They greet economic depression, unemployment, world wars and conflicts, and environmental disasters with barely concealed glee, since these all foreshadow the final destruction of modern civilization. So there is this sadistic, redemptive component of the pessimist tradition. The sowing of despair and self-doubt has become pervasive.

Where does this pessimism and view of decline originate? Here Herman does some longer term historical analysis. He claims that virtually every culture past and present has believed that men and women are not up to the standards of their parents and forebears. I would affirm here from Mircea Eliade’s History of Religious Ideas that these views have been noted in past traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and elsewhere. They have a long history and have been widely adopted across the world (that the present moment is a degradation from the past).

Herman traces ideas of decline in Homer’s Iliad and other ancient writings. The ancients believed the entire cosmos was governed by a process of generational decay, beginning in a past golden age when gods ruled and men lived in peace and harmony followed by a silver age, a bronze age, and finally an iron age when men are forced to live by the sweat of their brow and suffer their fate (think of Daniel’s statue here). Why has this sense of decline been common to all cultures? He suggests it may simply reflect the human experience of bodily changes from childhood to maturity and the inevitable decay of physical and mental capacity in old age. The collective memory of the past tends to be of a world endowed with powers that now seem lost, says Herman. These lost powers seem to form the key stages of human existence itself.

Others (Greco-Roman view of time) held the conviction that events occur according to a repetitive cycle. All things return eventually to the primal darkness or chaos and start anew.  Then the Golden Age is restored.

He notes that Christianity through its Hebrew antecedents introduced a more linear view of history, it was no longer cyclical. This was a redemptive view, focused on a Second Coming. Augustine promoted this view of history and his City of God became the foundation of Christian theology in the medieval West. “Salvation seemed to require the violent and catastrophic destruction of everything that had come before”.

And then a new, less catastrophic vision of history emerged- the idea of progress. This was an idea associated with civilization. And here he gives an interesting account of the development of the idea of civilization/progress- the increasing development of complexity according to a regular pattern. It originally meant living under Roman or civil law. This law denoted a way of life distinct from that of  barbarism, with prohibitions against  murder, incest, and cannibalism. Respect for marriage, for property and contract laws, and so on. These laws were natural, meaning that learning to live in accordance with  natural law was something distinct from mere instinct or habit. Civilization is a process that moves people from primitive existence to something more sophisticated or civilized, something better.

Of special interest here is that he notes the role of commerce in civilizing people. “Commerce tends to wear off those prejudices which maintain distinction and animosity between nations...it unites them by one of the strongest of all ties, the desire of supplying their mutual wants”. The commerce that produces the wealth of nations is also the primary mechanism for achieving human progress and turning men from beasts into civilized beings. So progress is inseparable from the idea of civilization.

I will skip over large sections here to get to the introduction of modern ideas of decline. This is fascinating as modern environmentalism expresses so much of this line of thought. That past primitive man was noble and pure and modern society has corrupted humanity with its abundance and improved living conditions, making modern man soft and immoral. He traces many varied thinkers such as Hegel and his influence on Marx. Others include Herbert Spencer, and many other near modern thinkers and their writings on progress and decline. Spencer was shaken from his views of progress by the discovery of the second law of dynamics and the law of entropy, the idea that endless progress was not possible since all energy must eventually dissipate and life itself cease (the old physic’s apocalyptic- that the universe will eventually stop expanding and collapse back on itself, a view now abandoned with the discovery of an ever-expanding universe) .

Romanticism is then treated as the growing counterweight to ideas of progress. It’s pessimism was rooted in the French Revolution, which shaped nineteenth century imagination just as the Holocaust shaped twentieth century imagination (the great betrayal of humanity’s ideals).

But enough. What caught my attention was his treatment of such lines of thought as the emerging view that primitive societies and people were superior to moderns with our complex, developed societies, and comfortable lifestyles. The ancients were viewed as more pure, less materialistic, and made of tougher moral fibre (the old generational decline myth). I don’t need to repeat as I have many times before how such works as James Payne’s History of Force (Or Paul Seabright’s In The Company of Strangers) will put the lie to such distorting mythology. We live in the best of times along a historical line of progress where all major trends continue to improve and get better.

Herman’s book is a worthwhile read for its perspective on long term history and understanding something of the history of modern cultural pessimism, arguably the dominant perspective today.

Wendell Krossa

Another post on Herman’s book:

Herman does an interesting chapter on Arthur Gobineau (French aristocrat, born 1816) and racial pessimism. Gobineau developed the racial theory of Aryanism, a pure originating race that has been diluted and degraded ever since. This originating race was land-based, rural and agricultural. Gobineau viewed modern commerce as part of the degrading process, with its urban setting. This is part of his bitter disillusionment with modern European civilization.He argued that nomads and even cannibals had more vitality and dignity. Commerce/money had ruined this original vitality and purity.

His views adopted the conventional assumption of a racial hierarchy of white-yellow-black.

The idea of a vanished original race dated back to the Greeks and the myth of Atlantis. Herman says this is another variant of the Golden Age myth. This idea that primitivism- an ancient and superior race of philosophers, inventors, artists- had once created a vanished supercivilization. The Aryans were this original founding race, with great beauty, courage, strong sense of personal honor and nobility of spirit. They had great intellects and were men of the soil, with roots in the land rather than in urban centers (note the elements of contemporary environmental beliefs here). This founding race had lost its purity by the time of Christ, says Herman. It had become degenerate and exhausted. This was due to wealth, commerce, and civilization.

Gobineau’s mentor, Albert Tocqueville, was critical of Gobineau’s theory, especially his pessimism and views on decline. He argued that pessimism was the great sickness of that age. He subsequently distanced himself from his protégé. But the German composer, Richard Wagner, took an interest in Gobineau’s writing and pushed his theories on a group of artists and intellectuals in Germany. Some of these people were transformed by the racial theories of Gobineau. This resulted in a reinterpretation of his theories in terms  of German history and culture. The German volk soul was being destroyed by materialism and industrialization. The rural customs and traditions of the common folk were being overwhelmed. And contrary to Gobineau’s own statements denigrating the German race, one of Wagner’s students, a man named Lagarde, saw the German national soul as the true descendent of the original Aryan race. He was involved in starting the Gobineau Society which influenced German politicians and intellectuals. This led to a significant influence on the creation of Pan-German nationalist feeling. That Germany alone was standing against the modern European disintegration, cultural, social, and racial. This led to the pursuit of racial purity.

Houston Chamberlain, who married Wagner’s daughter, reached a wider audience with Gobineau’s theories. He argued that Germans were being betrayed by newcomers and enemies. Their pure blood was being contaminated by mixture with the impure races of the slave born. The original Teutonic blood of the German people faced dilution and oblivion and European civilization hung in the balance. Chamberlain then introduced a new corrupting element- the principal villains behind the destruction of Teutonic vitality- the Jews. The Jews were symbols of soulless commercial society. They were without soul, a tainted race. Capitalism, liberal humanitarianism, sterile science- Jewish science as Chamberlain called it (referring to Albert Einstein)- were all forms of race pollution, the modern instruments of the Jews. Chamberlain concluded that strenuous measures had to be taken against such a dangerous alien. In 1927 he met the  man who would undertake that life or death struggle, Adolf Hitler. Hitler viewed Chamberlain as his spiritual father.

Fascinating history and it presents varied originating strains of modern environmental thought. Others have also noted the roots and linkages of contemporary environmental thought in German belief systems (Alston Chase’s In A Dark Wood).

Wendell Krossa

One final post on Herman:

Arthur Herman’s book The Idea of Decline in Western History is important to understanding the dominant  narrative of pessimism today. It is detailed, thorough, and full of fascinating stories of the leading actors in the pessimist narrative. In his third chapter he treats Burckhardt and Nietzsche’s contribution to declinist thought. The same decline themes continue through all these actors. Spiritual vitality  has been lost in the change to modernity and progressive civilization with its urban industry and easier lifestyle. Dissolution is evident. Impending collapse is imminent. The creative and ordered past is fading. Pessimism turns to fatalism and the only option is resignation and withdrawal, says Herman. The destruction and passing of the old is witnessed with fear and regret. Vital elites are no longer able to maintain the order of the past as mass citizen democracy permits the many to change things just because they wish it. This brings mediocrity in the eyes of the elite pessimist.

Nietzsche brings his own dark nihilism to this ongoing pessimist narrative. Capitalism creates new miseries and exploitation. Hurry and worry spoil life. Money becomes the measure of all things. Readers can hear modern complaints in this 19th century doom and gloom. Elites are forced to compromise with the rabble.

Nietzsche enters an association with the German composer Wagner who shares this fallen and declining  humanity myth.

Others like Schopenhauer with his escapist Eastern ideas (life is suffering- we must abandon, renounce and escape it and its drives for money, love, and power). They all recoil at the contemptible money economy, capitalism. Modern Europe has lost its vital greatness. A new elite must step forward and turn away from the prevailing materialistic civilization. Mass democracy and capitalism are precipitating a breakdown of civilization.

In Nietzsche’s view man has lost the will to power. The Aryans were alive and complete humans because they possessed the will to power, to conquer. Modern man has lost this vitality and now experiences an ebbing away, a decadence. But the imminent collapse is cause for rejoicing as a rejuvenated new order can then be brought in (Salvationism). Others rejected Nietzsche’s thought as tending toward despotism.

It is at this time that the theory of degeneration is introduced by the Italian doctor Cesare Lombroso. His examination of a criminal corpse leads to the evaluation of people based on physical features. This leads directly to eugenics. The population of Europe is seen as degenerating physically due to cross breeding between Aryans and less vital human types. Degeneration is defined as the morbid deviation from an original type. A new sub species emerges, less vital than its forbears. The eugenicists took their impetus from degeneration theory. They believed that new barbarians were emerging.

About this time Darwin had introduced a new view of ongoing progressive development to higher biological species. A process of continuous improvement. But this was countered with the theory of atavism, that every organism has lost characteristics that would reappear under certain conditions and then passed on to offspring. This became the foundation stone of degeneration theory. This was used to explain criminal behaviour and racial characteristics. Degeneration was employed to explain the emerging industrial society. The modern urban industrial civilization contained within it a rising stain of morbidity in the human population (it was argued that crime was worse in the urban industrial world).

I am skipping huge sections to pull out comments here and there to try and give some sense of Herman’s research and flow of thought. You can see so much of ancient mythology here (Fall of man, subsequent decline). And this interesting thing of the human resentment toward change to something new. Many of these thinkers were elitists/aristocrats who mourned the loss of elite powerholding structures in the face of rising democratic rights.

Herman says, “A key factor in this postliberal persuasion was precisely the fear of degeneration. The assumption that modern civilization is psychologically debilitating became a standard axiom of the social sciences and social psychology...the only way to avert a crisis was by turning to solutions that would replace laissez-faire liberalism”. Hence the warning to Nietzsche from a colleague that  his ideas tended toward totalitarianism (socialism). Eugenics then found strong support among radicals and socialists (George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells). Only the state could organize and take the coercive steps necessary for a serious eugenics program (an anti-degeneration program).

Into this mess of thought and action emerges Ernst Haeckel the father of the environmental movement (see Alston Chase’s In A Dark Wood). Herman notes that he presents his theory of monism, that man is not in God’s image but is just another species in nature. Opponents accused Haeckel’s eugenics solutions as pointing the way to socialist dictatorship. He became the chair of the Society for Racial Hygiene. This spread across Germany with many agreeing some form of state socialism was needed to promote eugenics and controlled selection in order to preserve the German race. “The fear of degeneration, and appeals for collective state solutions, could drive progressive practitioners into the arms of those willing to marshal the forces of the state to save civilization, regardless of the cost”.

All of this then found its way into Freud’s theories. Freud also held to a Fall of man, a fatal flaw in civilization at its origin.

And then on to America and the progressive/declinist debates there.

Lots of food for thought in this detailed history- the recurrence of ancient mythological themes, of Fall and ongoing decline toward looming disaster and ending, of the evils of progress and material abundance, the moral pre-eminence of a rural lifestyle, of the need for strong leadership to coercively return degenerating humanity to its more pure past (coercive historical intervention to save, as in the Christian view), and so on.

Wendell Krossa

Let me add that this area of research- progress and decline studies- is quite fascinating as it gets to the heart of today’s great struggle for consciousness and its fundamental orientation and what this means to all life.

You have the few establishing a new tradition of progress studies- Julian Simon (Ultimate Resource, Its Getting Better All The Time), Greg Easterbrook (A Moment On the Earth), Indur Goklany (The Improving State of the World), Bjorn Lomberg (The Sceptical Environmentalist), and Matt Ridley (The Rational Optimist). These researchers look at the long term trends of life on our planet which all show improvement. But they are Davids standing against the Goliaths of modern pessimism. And mainstream media don’t find much of ratings spurs in progress research. Doom and gloom get more attention.

So for anyone wanting to join the great battle of our age, get on board the progress train heading for the front.