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Decadence and the Phenomenon of Generations

Julien Freund¹

Decadence is a long process which extends itself over multiple generations. In any case, succeeding generations don't feel it in the same way. My generation may experience the sentiment of decadence, because the Europe of its youth was still a relatively flourishing civilization, before the Second World War. It is probable that the generation of my grandchildren will no longer experience this sentiment, as a result of not having seen the period of European power, that it will find itself in decadence, which becomes its daily horizon, in a way it will be living "with it" without posing the questions which preoccupy us. In truth, all the members of my generation do not have the perception of decadence, and they are even numerous, because the socialists give themselves the project of edifying a new society and of creating a new man. They confine themselves to considering present society as defective, sometimes as deplorable, but not as decadent, from the fact of their belief that, by their action, they will give a new brightness to countries in Europe. Present society is, in their eyes, nothing but a stage on the way to indefinite progress, because the society of tomorrow will bring to fulfilment the beneficial trends which it already contains in a latent fashion. Otherwise, how would one qualify as decadent an epoch which characterizes itself by an unprecedented technological explosion and which still promises to ameliorate material conditions quite rapidly?

These reflections aid us in giving precision to the notion of decadence. It is an historical concept, which may mean many things. Above all, absolute decadence does not exist, in the metaphysical sense of the absolute, because, like any historical concept, it bears a relativity. The question to pose is the following: to what is it relative? As an historical concept it is inevitably relative to the past, to a spatio-temporal situation which has effectively existed. It could not be known as relative to the future, in the manner of utopia, history and utopia logically being contraries. Otherwise put, decadence appertains to the world of represented existence and not to that of a non-existent prefigured world which ought one day to exist. In the second instance, the idea of decadence implies a situation which is in decline, in the path of deterioration in relation to an anterior state which was a state of expansion, of power or which still manifested a positive intensity in the different domains of human activity. Even in this case decadence would remain an empty notion if one could not mark the fall by boundary poles, of objectively determinable signs, therefore effectively detectable in the temporal course of things. Utopia does not have need of this genre of determinations because it escapes from historical time and that it is of the order of the imaginary, of the pure idea which pretends to be true beyond all spatio-temporal experience. This does not mean that the imaginary ought to be condemned, because it is one of the dimensions of thought, but it remains inoperative if one wants to grasp the phenomenon of decadence. Finally, it is necessary to define the notion of generation. It designates an indistinct collectivity according to the age of its members, which means that it assembles sociologically, without other precision, those who are the same age. The notion of generation is thus one of the means of giving the rhythm of historical time according to the biological criterion. One generation lives an history which the succeeding generations can only represent to themselves. In this sense it designates a collective experience.

We now possess the elements which allow us to indicate the reasons for which my generation may experience the sentiment of decadence. We have experienced in our youth the end of the European epos, which began in the sixteenth century. We participated directly or indirectly in the Second World War, characterized by the loss of the world power which Europe had exercised and its displacement to America and Russia. We have also known the Europeans as masters of the seas and of the lands of the globe, we have collaborated in the prodigious extension of scientific and technological thought which has burst forth from the sciences of nature and edified the human sciences (sociology, ethnology, etc.). We have participated in that which without doubt will be the last intra-European conflict, the last of the conflicts which have sustained the European vitality over the course of the centuries on the basis of a creative rivalry between the European peoples. We were witnesses to the vitality of the cultural and artistic foyer which Europe was, where the American writers like H. James, H. Adams or Hemingway and the Russian writers like Turgenev and Dostoyevsky came to drink as from the source of a stream. During our youth Europe had achieved the conquest of the Earth, not leaving unexplored any region of the globe. Europe thus attained its limits, because there no longer subsisted upon the Earth any unknown zones. But we would thus ignore that it had come to reach its limits, that it would no longer go beyond them. We would not know it, any more than we would know that the Resistance would be the last jolt of Europe confronted with its demons. But we know it today, because in the space of one decade all of this immense secular construction was brusquely demolished. In ten years the patient and gigantic work of four centuries collapsed, Europe no longer controlling any geographic space other than its own. The destiny of the world no longer depends upon Europe, except incidentally, whether this is a matter of politics, of the economy, of the military, of art. Life goes on, and Europe is no longer what it was. It's not a matter of the end of the world, but of the decadence of Europe.

The marker which permits speaking of decadence therefore finds itself in the experience of my generation, because it may compare the Europe which was and that which it is no longer. The sudden weakening of our continent we at first set aside under shock: we didn't want to realize it. It was only very slowly, after having experienced the aftermath of the war as if nothing irremediable had happened, that we suspected the presence of decline. This marker is historically objective, given that it is determinable in space and time. Henceforth nothing will be any longer for Europeans as it was before. Indeed, Europe continues to exist, just as Greece after the conquest of the cities, one after another. The decline is not an annihilation, all the more given that Europe still possesses a solid economic armature, that it still disposes of a non-negligible political authority, but no longer in the sphere of intra-European rivalries, but in an extra-European rivalry which is in some sense imposed upon it. We are no longer more than a weft, whereas we had been the fabric. Europe has ceased to be the centre of the Earth, at the moment in which its civilization was universalized, which is not to say fully recognized by other continents.

This sentiment of decadence which pertains to the experience of my generation will slowly subside in the spirit of the generations to come. Of Europe, master of the destiny of the world, they will have but a memory in their representation of history. Certainly, the generation which follows us, that of my sons, continues to experience a certain nostalgia in which we have inculcated them by our stories, but the turbulence of life will occupy the following generations, because they will no longer have access to the experience spoken of. They will accommodate themselves consciously or not to decadence, which is to say that they will live their present in which decadence will be absent, by the fact that it no longer appertains to their experience. It will be no more for

them than an historical subject as Greek, Roman, or even Spanish decadence are for us. Future generations will live their life, with their problems which we cannot pre-conceive, even if the utopians of the new society and of the new man pretend to be acquainted with them and even to resolve them on their behalf by placing them in advance and unwittingly in what they esteem ought to be their happiness. Here, this is not a matter of a fatuousness which refuses to integrate the idea of decadence in the course of historical events. Future generations will live upon the territory of Europe, but they will not be Europeans in the historical sense of the term, just as there have always been inhabitants in Rome, but they are not the Romans of history.

The historical sense of decadence does not teach us to cultivate bitterness. Besides, the generations to come will have other things to do: they will live fully and immediately, like the others, that which they will consider as their glory and their misery. The respect of generations consists in not inflicting on ours an oppressive regime under the pretext of liberating those who are not yet born. Despite the contemporary decadence we have to harness ourselves to a task which is not finished. The decline is there but it doesn't stop political life, economic life, artistic life, and other things. Decadence is not a terminus, an end of history, but the historical closure of a civilization. Another type of civilization, of which we may only in advance trace the contours, because it will be the work of the generations to come, will succeed it. We have entered into an interregnum, in the transition toward this other type of civilization, of which the sources will be, without doubt, no longer entirely European. It pertains to us to intervene as efficaciously, and, it may be hoped, as judiciously as possible, in order to assure this transition. Still, it is necessary to know that the tomorrows of a decadence are generally painful. I would like to draw attention to the manner in which Max Weber has de-dramatized the decadence of Rome in his study, *Die sozialen Gründe des Untergangs der antiken Kultur*.² There he shows how the social structures which would be those of the Middle Ages slowly germinated during this interregnum and would progressively come into place during many centuries, under the action of generations who had come to forget the decadence. Evidently all this was not done without tumults and sackings.

The great historians of Rome, like Gibbon or Renan, have situated the decline of Rome in the epoch of Marcus Aurelius. It was under this emperor that Rome renounced the policy of conquest for confining itself to defending the frontiers of the Empire. There was no sudden rupture, like the example of Europe which in the space of ten years was itself cantoned into its geographic space, but this halt to the élan of Roman politics rapidly had two consequences.

The first was in external politics: the abandonment of the most distant provinces, which had the effect of encouraging, sometimes despite themselves, the Barbarians, wholly surprised by the continued weakening of the Roman armies. The repercussions were rapidly felt in the legions, with the relaxing of discipline, up to the point of abandoning, on the part of the soldiers, after demanding before the emperor, their cuirass and their helmet, thus exposing themselves again, at their disadvantage, to the blows of the enemy. I only make mention of this point, amongst so many others which the historians have related to us of this epoch. The second was in internal politics: the power was placed in auction. The emperors succeeded at a mad rhythm, several of them only reigned for several months. Of ten inhabitants of Rome, there were no more than two who were still truly of Roman or Italian origin. Finally, cosmopolitanism became the rule, in such a way that Rome ended by ceasing to be the centre, this being displaced by the whim of the fantasies of the emperors, culminating in the division of the Empire. This was finally the collapse of the traditional values, religious, moral and otherwise. The occupation of Rome by the barbarians roused up no more than a few literary indignations.

If I have taken the example of Rome, this is in order to better understand the problem of generations. Barely two or three generations after Marcus Aurelius, Roman grandeur had already disappeared from consciousness. Hardly any author evoked decadence, because each new generation was preoccupied by its immediate vital problems, by the religious quarrels, the succession of ephemeral emperors. One attempted to defend oneself on the frontiers, but one didn't in any way preoccupy oneself with the menaces around the Mediterranean basin, where one contented oneself with surviving in the daily gloom, without other horizons. In all probability, the European generations to come will have as little care for that which Europe was as the Romans of the fifth century for that which Rome was, save for some spasms like that of the Emperor Julian. Constantine, Theodosius concerned themselves above all with consolidating their power, and not with the destiny of Rome. Rome had even ceased to be an idea for the generations of the decline: they didn't even know that they lived in decadence. This didn't interest them, which is to say that the decline wasn't even accepted, but quite simply ignored.

The decadence of Europe appears to me as an historical phenomenon with no return. Certainly, one will elaborate the projects of the European Renaissance, and perhaps one will witness desperate efforts comparable to those of the Emperor Julian. The energy is spent, the vital instinct has emigrated into other desires, other expectancies. The thread is torn. Europe has left us, European cohesion no longer even exists in the traditional sense because there are no longer the European prejudices, without which there is no civilization. The Europeans have lost everything, even the aggressive symbolism. They lose their time and their forces in wanting to unite, like all weak things. In politics one does not unite for the sake of uniting, but the union is spontaneously born of the will to realize a work together. Tomorrow, there will be many chances for the Europeans to preoccupy themselves only with nothing other than the decisions or non-decisions of the powers in place, caring as little for Europe as the Romans of the fifth century did for Rome. Rome was no longer anything more than the city which they inhabited. Moreover, Europe itself becomes cosmopolitan under the pressure of a social mobility which makes even the Europeans remain no longer within the region in which they are born. The spirit of the mass has suffocated the aristocratic sense which all civilization bears within itself. What's the good of defending Europe if European civilization is worth no more nor less than another civilization? One defends oneself only for the sake of hierarchies. We witness the irreversible processes of unravelling and dispersion, inhabited as we are by a disenchantment, which causes us to confound music with noise, thought with writing, language with the alignment of words, a picture with the juxtaposition of colours.

The transition extends without doubt over a number of generations, even one or two centuries, prior to which the relative stabilization of minds, characteristic of a civilization, around new values recognized by the communities, has yet to be produced. This transition will be all the more difficult to negotiate as we are witnessing another type of occupation of space, by reason of urbanization and of social mobility, and as we hardly come to take the measure of the surprising innovations of the last twenty years in biology, in technology, and particularly in computer science. That which is found to be the cause is the general problem of education, so determinative for a civilization. Beyond this, despite certain projections, we may in no way foresee the capital innovations of which the present innovations will be the agents, no more than the effects which they may have upon behaviour. The task of the new generations which are called to orient the transition is therefore pricklier than we may think, by the fact of a certain slumber which overtakes human beings during the first period of a process of decadence. We don't even know which will

be the new problems which will be posed; by consequence we may not prefigure the manner of resolving them and we are not even capable of defining the spirit which will preside over the solution of these problems.

One would therefore be wrong to think that a period of transition will necessarily be a period of mediocrity, of cultural poverty and of material penury. It is necessary on the contrary to arm ourselves for it now in order to confront with perseverance, confidence and even enthusiasm the new interregnum. If we want to attentively consider past history, we see that it is made as much of transitions as of characterized civilizations. That's why it will not suit to classify these statements under the categories of resignation or defeatism. On the contrary, it's during the periods of transition that it is wholly necessary to cultivate in particular the spirit of lucidity and courage. The political is always in preparation of new destinies, whether it's a matter of construction or of evolution, each one of these two states bearing its conflicts.

The theorists of decadence since Polybius have asked whether they ought to explain a decline by the external causes or the internal causes, or, following Saint Ambrose, by the *hostes extranei*³ or the *hostes domestici*⁴. In reality, decadence does not constitute a unilateral process and by consequence it is not unilaterally explained by one series of causes or another. In addition, the series of each of these two sorts of causes is itself placed in the plural, in such a way that one may only evaluate the one set and the other by an historical interpretation which is as rigorous as possible. All decadence manifests itself by an internal social decomposition, as the consequence of the dissolution of the hierarchic principle which had commanded the civilization up until then, which is to say, in the language of Pareto, the drying up in the circulation of elites. This in no way excludes that a decline may accompany, in certain conditions, remarkable artistic or literary works. Saint Augustine was an author of the Roman decadence. The question is to know whether the internal decomposition does not attract the bird of prey which comes from the exterior. In general, a civilization in decline falls victim to an external enemy. This eventuality ought to constitute the principal point of our preoccupations, because, if it intervenes, a civilization in general loses the liberties which it had enjoyed up until that point. We are in the heart of the political: will the period of transition maintain its political capacity? That's the question which Demosthenes posed at the moment of the decline of Athens.

Indeed, this is precisely the case that European decadence proceeds under the eye of a virtual enemy who in no way hides his designs. In addition, this is a matter of a world ideological enemy which Europe herself has engendered, under the form of the secularization of Christian eschatology. That will be, it truly seems, the challenge which the generations to come will have to confront. If it should ever allow itself to be seduced by the enemy which it has nourished at its own breast, the decadence, verily, will be consummated, without great hope for the possibilities of transition. We are thus entering into that which Max Weber called the "polar night, glacial, somber and rude", in which all Europeans lose their rights, including that of their decadent behaviour. In effect, decadence possesses, despite all this, certain charms and procures, in its way, certain enjoyments.

Notes

¹ Edited and translated by S. G. Zeitlin on the basis of Freund's original French article, "La décadence et le phénomène des générations," in *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 23 (1985), 71 : 109-115. In the original article the title is followed by an asterisk note stating that the text is a "Communication présentée le 4

octobre 1985 au Colloque d'Athènes” [communication presented 4 October 1985 at the Colloque d'Athènes]. Aside from this opening note affixed to the article's title, there are no footnotes in Freund's French original. All footnotes are those of the editor and translator.

² German in Freund's French original: *The Social Grounds of the Decline of Ancient Culture*.

³ Latin in Freund's French original: external enemies.

⁴ Latin in Freund's French original: domestic enemies.