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Book Review by Charles Murray

**Comfortably Numb**

The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success, by Ross Douthat.
Avid Reader Press, 272 pages, $27

“Complaining about decadence is, almost by definition, a luxury good,” Ross Douthat observes in his new book, *The Decadent Society*. It is also an easy target for derision if returning to an un-decadent society means, for example, giving up antibiotics. The world in the 21st century is a better place than it has ever been on every measure of material well-being. This is most conspicuously true in the nations of the advanced West that are most open to accusations of decadence.

The *New York Times* columnist recognizes this, but asks us nonetheless to consider ways in which there is much to complain about. He takes his definition of decadence from Jacques Barzun’s *From Dawn to Decadence* (2000). “All that is meant by Decadence is ‘falling off,’” Barzun wrote.

It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary, it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The forms of art as life seem exhausted; the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are the great historical forces.

It will be asked, how does the historian know when Decadence sets in? By the open confession of malaise.... When people accept futility and the absurd as normal, the culture is decadent. The term is not a slur; it is a technical label.

Douthat assesses contemporary life in terms of “the four horsemen” of decadence: stagnation, sterility, sclerosis, and repetition.

Economic stagnation is the most widely documented form of contemporary stagnation, characterized by falling GDP growth rates over the past half-century, little or no growth in working-class wages, lower social mobility, lower geographic mobility in search of new jobs, and healthy working-class males dropping out of the labor force. Douthat adds a twist to this familiar story that took me by surprise but ultimately convinced me: we are also in the midst of a prolonged period of technological stagnation.

How can this be, when the I.T. revolution has made daily life in 2020 so different from daily life in 2000? Douthat asks us to look at it another way. Since the advent of the industrial revolution, the world has seen “shared cultural moments in which some feat of technical mastery elicits the same kind of spiritualized reaction as the majesty of nature or the glory of France’s Chartres Cathedral”—in
Americans’ own experience, such feats as the steamship, railroad, assembly line, and commercial aviation. Historians Perry Miller and David Nye label this concept “the technological sublime.”

In America, the last such event occurred half-a-century ago when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon. What passes for the sublime since then has been restricted to the consumer’s sublime (Disney World, Las Vegas), the prospect of a sublime yet to be realized (nuclear fusion), and, of course, the “virtually” sublime. Douthat acknowledges the complications and caveats involved in his argument, but concludes that

the basic stagnation case, caveats and all, seems to capture a real change. We used to travel faster, build bigger, live longer; now we communicate faster, chatter more, snap more selfies. We used to go to the moon; now we make movies about space—amazing movies with completely convincing special effects—in which small fortunes are spent to make it seem like we’ve left earth behind.

Sterility as Douthat uses the word refers to the below-replacement birth rates that are observed in almost every advanced nation. Low birth rates have a variety of adverse economic consequences, but that’s not the main point. Societies without many young people “are simply less likely to be dynamic, less interesting in risk taking, than societies with younger demographic profiles.” The growing number of young adults who say they don’t even want children is linked with solipsism and anomie. Their rates of depression increase, along with those of people who vaguely wanted to have children but never got around to it.

The increasing sclerosis of institutions has been documented and widely accepted for half a century thanks to Mancur Olson’s two seminal books, The Logic of Collective Action (1965) and The Rise and Decline of Nations (1982). Institutional sclerosis is baked into the politics of advanced democracies, Olson argued, the result of forces that James Madison anticipated in The Federalist. A small interest group composed of people who are intensely motivated to pass a law or regulation that benefits them can overcome the diffuse opposition of the great mass of the population (the persistence of sugar subsidies is a standard illustration). The response to the COVID-19 pandemic will doubtless provide a worldwide basis for comparing the stages of institutional sclerosis across nations. No one who has studied the functioning of the American administrative state in recent decades can doubt that the United States is suffering from an advanced case.

So far, I have summarized aspects of advanced civilizations that are probably inevitable but are not necessarily all that bad.

In itself, slow economic growth doesn’t mean things are getting worse, just that they aren’t getting better quite as fast as they used to. The malaise and sense of futility associated with economic stagnation are genuine responses as of 2020, but need not be such forever. Surely people can learn to be cheerful about slow growth in the presence of fantastical absolute wealth—and that’s what slow growth will inexorably produce.

In itself, a national birth rate at or slightly below replacement is a good thing, not a bad thing—populations can’t keep expanding forever without eventual catastrophe. Today, below-replacement birth rates often reflect social and cultural malaise. But one can imagine future cultures in which zero population growth is not a symptom of cultural sterility but the result of a mature policy choice taken by a society that loves and values children.

In itself, institutional sclerosis arises from specific, known defects in law, regulations, and incentives. Although the process that produces it may be an inescapable part of democracy, the problems it creates are ones that can be fixed or at least ameliorated by better policies if the political will can be found.

The fourth of Douthat’s four horsemen, repetition, is different from the others. It is not just an indicator of cultural exhaustion. It is the thing itself. It is seen most easily in terms of the arts over the period that Barzun wrote about, 1500 to 1900.

The Renaissance produced three rich new (or to some degree rediscovered) cognitive inventions in the arts: linear perspective for the visual arts, polyphony for music, and the use of the vernacular for literature. The implementation of these resources was fostered by technological innovations—oil paints for the visual arts, improved instruments for music, and the printing press for literature. Through 1900, the combination of cognitive and technological innovation produced successive waves of wonderful new creations. But harbingers of exhaustion were discernible even in the 19th century, and became palpable not long into the 20th.

The visual arts represent the obvious example of deterioration. By mid-century, with a few admirable exceptions, the modern art world seemed determined to make itself the butt of jokes, as Tom Wolfe memorably described in The Painted Word (1975). Little has changed since.

In music, the disappearance of listenable music in the high culture (again with a few admirable exceptions) was accompanied by vibrant creativity in the popular culture, whether it took the form of jazz, the compositions of George Gershvin, the Broadway musicals of the 1940s and ’50s, or rock ’n roll during the 1960s and ’70s. But since the late ’70s? The increasing repetitiveness of composition and musicianship in pop music has been documented in technical journals, but it’s not necessary to resort to that level of subtlety. What’s the difference, really, between the music of the 1990s and the 2010s—between the music of Madonna and Lady Gaga, of Mariah Carey and Adele? Between the heavy metal or rock or rap of the 1980s and those genres now? Nuances distinguish them. You don’t need to resort to nuances to tell the difference between the music of the 1970s and 1950s or the 1950s and 1930s.

In literature, serious American fiction was redefined continually through the first 60 years of the 20th century. Compare the distinctive sensibilities and styles apparent in the voices of Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, and John Updike. How are the sensibilities and styles of the best authors in the 2010s distinguishable from those writing in the 1980s?

Does the picture improve when we turn to the new platforms that the 20th century gave us, film and television? For most of the 20th century, those new platforms fostered steadily improving creations. The film industry still produces the occasional gem, but the gems are increasingly buried beneath the pile of superhero franchises and recycling of old material. Consider: among the 25 top-grossing films in 2019, just three—12%—had a story line and characters that had not already appeared on screen. The others were all sequels or remakes. By way of comparison, the percentage of new stories and characters for the top-25s from 1950 to 1979 was 90%.

The closest thing to an exception to the curse of repetition is television, which has produced a torrent of high-quality miniseries over the past 20 years. But, Douthat points out, there’s a caveat even for television: “it’s telling that even the great shows of the early 2000s often felt vital and relevant precisely because they were so good at holding up a mirror to frustration, futility, repetition, decay, corruption—in a word, to decadence”—and here he cites The Wire, House of Cards, Break-
ing Bad, True Detective, and Girls as examples. And, he adds, even television’s golden age appears to be increasingly replaced by a different age “in which the flood of content is overwhelming but also often algorithmically optimized, tending inevitably toward its own forms of repetition, mediocrity, the safe imitation of more daring forms” — a transition exemplified by the abrupt deterioration of Game of Thrones in its final season.

I have focused on repetition in the arts. Douthat also discusses repetition as it applies to many other aspects of the culture, including politics and religion. If you have come to the end of my summary of his case for decadence unpersuaded by the examples I have given, be assured that the book makes all of his points with a broad lens, far more detail, and brilliantly. The Decadent Society is absorbing from beginning to end — partly because Douthat anticipates and responds to the questions his readers are likely to ask, but mostly because he is an original thinker and terrific writer.

As you will have gathered by this time, Douthat’s version of decadence is far different from decadence as many of us used to think of it. In the 1970s — the decade of Studio 54, open marriages, mainstream porn, powder cocaine at upscale parties, and skyrocketing crime — we seemed to be headed toward the hedonistic dystopia portrayed in Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange. It now appears that Aldous Huxley was more prophetic than Burgess. Douthat argues that society is moving toward a “comfortable numbness.” Crystal meth is still with us, but the drugs with the broadest appeal now are downers such as marijuana, heroin, and opioids, more like the soma of Brave New World than mania-inducing uppers. Virtual realities, whether they consist of sex robots or wraparound gaming headsets, offer other kinds of escape. These new uses of drugs and virtual realities “don’t solve social problems; indeed they worsen them...but at the same time, they prevent those problems from having the broader consequences that a society without so many drugs and distractions would expect to experience.”

Brave New World also appears to have been more prophetic than George Orwell’s 1984. Douthat describes the kindly despotism that is likely to oversee decadent societies as “the pink police state” — a state that merely nudges if possible, shoving only when necessary. The pink police state will protect civil liberties of pleasure and consumption and the freedom to be “safe.” The unprotected civil liberties will be freedoms of speech, religion, and privacy.

The question is how much staying power such a society will have. In the past, each decadent civilization has eventually given way to a dynamic competitor. In our case, might it be Islam? China? Russia? An America led by a more capable populist president? Douthat doubts it, for reasons specific to each case. But there is also the possibility of a worst case that he describes in a chapter titled “Catastrophe.” Suppose that climate change has created an uninhabitable equator. The aging advanced nations cannot sustain their deficit-financed prosperity. The population of Africa continues its rapid growth, resulting in a mass migration into Europe that meets increasing resistance. This is a combustible mix that could in fact produce an unprecedented global political and economic crisis. Douthat is skeptical that it will actually happen, but the chance is nontrivially greater than zero.

What about the possibility of turning everything around? Making Western Civilization Great Again? Also unlikely, Douthat concludes. The politics of America and of many other Western countries are stymied by a deadlock “between people who imagine that the resources of a fading past can revitalize Europe and America, and people who think that the only possible problem with our cosmopolitan society is that it isn’t cosmopolitan enough.” Neither side shows signs of being able to prevail, because each suffers from a fatal weakness: “A conservatism with no vision of how to vitalize itself and, therefore, no defense except the wall, the moat, the rampart. A liberalism that doesn’t recognize how little it satisfies the human heart; how vulnerable it would be to real challenges if they arose.”

But who knows? Rome in the first century from Tiberius through Nero was the classic illustration of a decadent polity — but Trajan became emperor just 30 years after Nero’s death, beginning a century during which the Roman Empire reached its peak and then sustained that peak (more or less) for another two centuries.

And yet, and yet…. Rome also makes the case that decadence matters. After the republic fell, the fabled Roman virtues crumbled. Civic life deteriorated in ways that affected not only patriots but plebeians. Despite its power and immensity, the empire produced little that was new and lasting. In Edward Gibbon’s harsh judgment, imperial Rome was “peopled by a race of pygmies.” W.H. Auden was still more damning: “What fascinates and terrifies us about the Roman Empire is not that it finally went smash,” but that “it managed to last for four centuries without creativity, warmth, or hope.” To Ross Douthat, that sounds grimly like the predicament in which our decadent society finds itself. “[T]he only thing more frightening than the possibility of annihilation is the possibility that our society could coast on forever as it is — like a Rome without an Attila to sack its palaces, or a Nineveh without Yahweh to pass judgment on its crimes.”

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