



The Idea of Decline in Western History

By Arthur Herman

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From Nazism to the Sixties counter-culture, from Britain's Fabian socialists to America's multiculturalists, and from "Dracula" and Freud to Robert Bly and Madonna, this work examines the idea of decline in Western history and sets out to explain how the conviction of civilization's inevitable end has become a fixed part of the modern Western imagination. Through a series of biographical portraits spanning the 19th and 20th centuries, the author traces the roots of declinism and aims to show how major thinkers of the past and present, including Nietzsche, DuBois, Sartre and Foucault, have contributed to its development as a coherent ideology of cultural pessimism.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In this ambitious and eminently relevant work of popular intellectual history, Arthur Herman, the coordinator of the Western civilization program at the Smithsonian Institution, makes a broad survey of the literature of cultural decline and a scatter-shot retort to the purveyors of doom and gloom. Herman attempts to right the balance upset by panicky prognosticators who either decry the defeat of Western values or herald the bankruptcy of Enlightenment idealism, despite the unparalleled worldwide ascendancy of market economics, universal human rights, and representational, constitutional government.

Herman is at his best when making erudite replies to today's ill-informed peddlers of doom and gloom. But when he starts attempting to trace the history of "declinism," to philosophers from Frederick Nietzsche to Martin Heidegger, and writers from Henry Adams to Robert Bly, his accusations often fall wide of the intended mark. His assaults on Jean Jacques Rousseau and W.E.B. DuBois will appear particularly unfair to those familiar with the works of these men, though readers who trust in Herman's abbreviated accounts of their thinking will be unknowingly misled. The "Great Ideas" framework Herman defends in the pages of this book ought to prize the close reading of important texts as much as it seeks to protect a sacrosanct canon or a static notion of prized ideals. Great ideas after all stand up to close attention. Herman's book conveys a confidence in the values of the Western tradition, but in making its argument, it inspires a casual disrespect from the works of other arguably great thinkers and artists based on Herman's swift survey--a dubious achievement and troublesome side effect of this challenging book.

From Library Journal

Herman, coordinator of the Western Civilization Program at the Smithsonian, argues, like Gress (above), that despite the West emerging triumphant from the Cold War, intellectuals continue to predict pessimistically the decline of the West as they have since the days of Nietzsche and Spengler. Modern society is always "materialistic, spiritually bankrupt, and devoid of human values. Modern people are always displaced, rootless, psychologically scarred, and isolated from one another." (LJ 2/15/97)

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From Booklist

Herman recaps the two-century-long tradition of criticism of Western civilization in this readable piece of intellectual history. He covers two historians most closely identified with predicting decline, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, and also brings forth less famous prognosticators of the doom of the West. Most were, as Herman summarizes their works and ideas, concerned about racial degeneration: few have heard the name Gobineau, a mid-nineteenth-century reactionary, but knowledge of him and similar writers who felt they could identify an Aryan "race," and deplored its alleged vitiation, gives readers one source of Nazi ideas. Shifting gears, Herman devotes a long chapter to the career of W. E. B. DuBois, particularly his embrace of Marxism, apparently as an example of how intellectuals (subsequently, Sartre, Marcuse, and Foucault) used the twentieth century's most common theoretical apparatus for critiquing a decadent West. Ending with multiculturalist and environmentalist ideas and their promoters' somewhat unconscious echoing of nineteenth-century ideas, Herman provides an accessible survey for the serious nonacademic. *Gilbert Taylor*

Users Review

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