

On decadent societies

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

Essay written by Francis Bennion in November 1946 as an undergraduate at Balliol College Oxford when reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics (Modern Greats).

It has been observed that 'all human things are subject to decay', and the lessons of history show how true this is when applied to human societies. Nothing in nature can exist without change, and when an organism has by constant change attained the fullest development and perfection possible to it Nature does not let it linger in perfection, but impatiently hurries it on through deterioration and decay to the death which alone can make possible a new and better living thing. If this progression is observed as it takes place in a single human being there is little difficulty in tracing its various stages, and we may find each stage possessing a certain completeness of its own. A child of two years, representing the stage of infancy, may appear a beautiful and delightful creature – a being of pretty ways and lovable mannerisms. Again the grown boy may appear as something complete – handsome, well-proportioned, and, in his light-hearted mischievousness, possessing an attractive quality peculiar to his kind. Yet we should not say that at these stages on the progress to maturity the human being can really be complete and perfect. He is like the opening bud, not without beauty in all its stages, but only really lovely in its prime. In the same way men and women may be attractive in old age but the approaching dissolution casts its shadow upon them.

Even with human beings, however, it is possible to over-simplify in this matter of growth and decay. There is no moment at which we can say of a man: 'He is at his best in every way'. The time of bodily perfection may not coincide with the full development of the mind. We are composed of many attributes, some ripening early and then falling into slow decay; others of gradual growth. Nevertheless we can and do speak of a man as being 'in his prime', meaning that on the whole those faculties associated with human maturity are at their peak of development in him.

The stages through which human societies pass do in some ways correspond to the stages of a man's own life. The primitive society of the savage tribe, with its unreasoning acceptance of custom and superstition, its naïve pleasures and its uncomprehended cruelty, has points of resemblance to a society of children, as it is found, say, in the preparatory school. The old or, to reach our point at last, the decadent society, suffers from a similar deterioration of mental and physical structure to that of the old man or woman.

We may now attempt to define a 'decadent society'. It is commonly understood as the condition reached by a community when, after enjoying a long period of peace and prosperity, its dominant members grow tired of straightforward living and practise new and unnatural modes of action. Its features are immorality, irreligion, slothfulness and corruption. When these vices have, maggot-like, attained a hold and multiplied the society is doomed, at least in its existing state. Only an access of new blood, in the form of vigorous, uncorrupted people, can give it new life. Often this influx comes from without the borders of the society, as the barbarians came to ancient Rome. Sometimes, however, it is a submerged portion of the society itself which rebels, and, like the French peasants of the Revolution, overthrows its corrupted masters.

Sometimes signs of decadence may appear, like greenish spots of mould, upon the surface of an otherwise healthy society. Although in themselves they may be harmless, and indeed may seem to add greatly to the interest and enjoyment of life in the society, they are to be thought of as danger signals, which, if disregarded, may foreshadow the end of the society. These

'spots of mould' appeared in England towards the end of the nineteenth century. The name of Oscar Wilde occurs automatically in this connection. His brilliant wit and exotic manners could not save him from the wrath of a society whose limits he had overstepped. The ending of the long Victorian period brought inevitable reactions against 'respectability' and the strict moral and religious codes. The seeds of decadence were there, and some of them sprang up. However, the structure of society proved to be too strong to be undermined. The country was not ruled by a despotic monarch, with an easily-debauched court and army, but by a democratic assembly. The great masses of the society had no inclination towards decadence. They were not tired of security and prosperity, and had no desire to seek the devious ways which lead to dissolution. From this it is reasonable to induce the fact that truly democratic societies are least liable to become decadent. Large masses of people would have to become surfeited with idleness and good living before there could be any prevalent desire for vice as an end in itself. Such a state of things seems remote from society as we know it but that does not mean it can cause us no anxiety. Democracy, as it exists in Britain today, is open to a slightly different, though hardly less disquieting, form of decadence than were the old societies of the past.

Oscar Wilde (if we may take the liberty of quoting a prince of 'decadents') once said that 'Democracy means the bludgeoning of the people, by the people, for the people'. In a sentence, this exposes one of the grave weaknesses of democracy: it is inclined to lead to rule by the untutored majority, rather than by the enlightened few. Plato put democracy last but one in his list of ideal forms of government, only considering tyranny to be worse. First of all he placed benevolent autocracy, and it is only the impossibility of its achievement, unless by luck, which can really be held against it. It is obviously true that a group of wise, benevolent, men – undefiled by corruption, selfishness, cruelty, or any of the traditional faults of tyrants – is better fitted to rule than are the swaying, vulgar, masses. The new form of decadence springs from the hedonistic, self-indulgent side of human nature which rules a democratic society precisely to the extent to which it rules the mass of individuals. The disciplines which should hold it in check, such as religion and innate promptings to duty, are weakened to feebleness in the all-pervading iconoclasm. This under-side of man's nature, which thus becomes all-powerful, leads to the debasing of that which is fine in human society. Moral codes are discarded as the worthless imposition of a discredited authority and religious beliefs, if held at all, are held lightly and not allowed to exercise any great influence on behaviour. The old satisfactions in hard work and honest living give way to the restless seeking for 'easy money' and the soul-destructive thirst for pleasure and excitement.

Such tendencies as these, which are so disturbing a feature of modern western societies, may be regarded as the ominous 'mould-spots' of the new decadence. Such a decadence, if it were allowed fully to develop, would be far more serious than the old minority-decadence of past societies. It would mean the ruination and final inevitable extinction of whole races. The development of vast masses of idle and hedonistic people in this country would mean the end of Britain as a great nation, especially if it came, as it well might, before industrial and scientific developments were such as to permit of a high standard of living as a corollary of only a small amount of individual labour. Such a development may seem remote today, when the nation is only just recovering from the terrific exertions of the late war, but although the signs of decadence now so plainly visible in our society may be partly ascribed to weariness after conflict there are surely deeper and more lasting causes. There is grave danger that the old moral and religious standards may never be restored; their restoration to a dominating position in society should be the object of all who truly love their country. Only thus can the portents of decadence be confounded and the nation keep its health and its greatness.