

CHAPTER

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THE MIRAGE OF IMMORTALITY—  
ENTROPY OF THE EVERLASTING

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*The facts stare us in the face, and, by exercising our historical imagination, we can perhaps anticipate the compulsory education that is already on its way to us.*  
Arnold Toynbee <sup>1</sup>

*Contrary to the optimistic diagnosis, the present crisis is not ordinary but extraordinary...it is a crisis involving almost the whole way of life, thought and conduct of Western society. More precisely, it consists in a disintegration of a fundamental form of Western culture and society dominant for the last four centuries.*  
Pitirim Sorokin <sup>2</sup>

*...all this, broad and imposing, is the prelude of a future which is still in store for us and with which the history of West European mankind will be definitely closed.*  
Oswald Spengler <sup>3</sup>

*For even though we may not believe in the imminent end of the world, it is hardly possible to doubt that a world is ending.*  
Christopher Dawson <sup>4</sup>

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Hubristically confident as Western man is of a *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body) unrivalled in history, he is bereft of prospects for diagnosing his potentially terminal illness. Indeed, the absence of humility and the ubiquitous presence of self-delusion are complementary hallmarks of the diagnostic criteria. Here we begin the process of analyzing those diagnostic criteria: what we can conclude about civilizational decline and decay generally from the study of history, and what we can conclude about the West's decline and decay specifically.

First, we should define what we mean by Western civilization. Our observers seem to all share the view that Western civilization is a nonseverable unity of Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand. Universally, they make little distinction, except of the more superficial sort, between these geographic segments. The destiny of one, in historical terms, will likely ultimately be the destiny of all. Samuel Huntington provides for us an especially useful definition of what is perhaps most often meant by the term Western civilization:

The term “the West” is now universally used to refer to what used to be called Western Christendom. The West is thus the only civilization identified by a compass direction and not by the name of a particular people, religion, or geographical area. This identification lifts the civilization out of its historical, geographical, and cultural context. Historically, Western civilization is European civilization. In the modern era, Western civilization is Euroamerican or North Atlantic civilization.<sup>5</sup>

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## NO CIVILIZATION IS IMMORTAL

*They appear suddenly, swell in splendid lines, flatten again and vanish,  
and the face of the waters is once more a sleeping waste.*

Oswald Spengler<sup>6</sup>

Though their views differ and the gravity with which they regard the trends of Western civilization varies, it would be an understatement to say that our observers all shared deep concerns about the future of our civilization. There is consensus among them that all civilizations die—or at least all preceding civilizations have died.

To the historically informed it may seem a statement of the self-evident to declare that all civilizations eventually die. But what is self-evident to one may be obscure—or anathema—to another, smitten as men tend to be with afflictions such as ethnocentrism and illusions of the power, merit and immortality of their own culture, race, ethnic group or civilization. Alexander Pushkin’s lines are apropos of how most of humanity, certainly Western citizens, view their own civilization:

Gazing at a solitary oak,  
I think: this patriarch  
Will outlive my forgotten age  
As it outlived the age of my fathers.<sup>7</sup>

But these infirmities of reason have afflicted millions for millennia and will likely continue to decimate reason and understanding in millions to come. The sober reality must be faced; no civilization has any prospect of even extending its life if its members cling to a belief in its immortality. To be sure, some will accept, even state, the abstract principle that all civilizations, like all human beings, die. But just as most human beings rarely contemplate their own death, unless compelled to do so by circumstance, even fewer citizens of powerful civilizations really think and behave as if their civilization is mortal, much less *in extremis*.

The historical evidence of the folly in this has been visited and revisited by historians, anthropologists and sociologists. In citing the work of Spengler and Toynbee on the question of whether “there is any regularity in the development of civilizations, in their slow growth and their sometimes rapid decline,” Philip Bagby articulated a common theme, specifically in his reference to the West:

It is a problem which seems to be of particular urgency in our own times, for a cold wind has blown across Europe, an intuition that European civilization is doomed to go the way of Egypt and of Rome, of Nineveh and Tyre. The loss of faith, the stagnation of the arts, the shattering of the Liberal dream, the catastrophic character of recent wars, all these have seemed to betoken an imminent decline.<sup>8</sup>



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A joint session of the American Congress. *Carroll Quigley explained the disintegration of civilizations in terms of the transformation of social “instruments” into “institutions.” By this he meant that the entities created by a society to carry it forward and to meet its needs eventually become self-serving and thus increasingly ineffectual in serving the society. This is especially true of their governments.*

Samuel Huntington, also citing other of our observers, noted the parallels and common features of modern theories of decline and decay:

While civilizations endure, they also evolve. They are dynamic; they rise and fall; they merge and divide...they also disappear and are buried in the sands of time. The phases of their evolution may be specified in various ways....While significant differences exist, all these theories see civilizations evolving through a time of troubles or conflict to a universal state to decay and disintegration.<sup>9</sup>

Citing Toynbee, Huntington explained why the West is neither immune to collapse nor in a position to be optimistic:

History ends at least once and occasionally more often in the history of every civilization. As the civilization’s universal state emerges, its people become blinded by what Toynbee called “the mirage of immortality” and convinced that theirs is the final form of human society. So it was with the Roman Empire, the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, the Mughal Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. The citizens of such universal states “in defiance of apparently plain facts...are prone to regard it, not as a night’s shelter in the wilderness, but as the Promised Land, the goal of human endeavors.” ...For the English middle class in 1897, “as they saw it, history for them, was over...” Societies that assume that their history has ended, however, are usually societies whose history is about to decline.<sup>10</sup>