



JE KINDLE-NOTITIES VOOR:

The Idea of Decline in Western History

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58 Highlights

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1158

Moral principles are the opposite of vitality and creativity—what Friedrich Nietzsche would call “the will to power.” In Gobineau’s later writings, particularly his *Renaissance* (1877), genuine creative power always sweeps aside issues of morality. According to him, the Renaissance marked the last triumph of Europe’s Aryan aristocracy over the bourgeois forces rising up against them. The result was a final spasmodic eruption of vitality not only in the artistic sphere—Michelangelo, da Vinci, Raphael—but in the politics exemplified by Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli as well. Gobineau’s cultural hero is entirely

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“Power is everything, the master key,” Gobineau later wrote to Richard Wagner. “It destroys everything in its path, and leaves nothing behind.”⁴⁹ It is, as Nietzsche would later say, “beyond good and evil.” Gobineau died in Turin on February 14,

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France’s overwhelming defeat in 1870 by the new German Empire, and the civil war and Commune of the following year, set off a wave of fears about French national degeneration that, if not borrowed directly from Gobineau, certainly made him appear more right than wrong. Yet Gobineau never caught on in France as a racial theorist, and the language of degeneration was never linked to any specific Gobinian perspective. Its roots lay elsewhere, in the kind of “scientific” and positivist liberal racial theory that Gobineau had repudiated. However, when Gobineau first lamented the failure of his *Essay on the Inequality of Races* in France, Tocqueville had predicted that he would find a better response in Germany, which turned out to be correct.

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Lagarde reflected the bitterness of the culturally conservative successors to the German Romantics, who saw progress as the Trojan Horse of a soulless bourgeois future. Mechanization, philistinism, socialism, and liberalism were all of a piece; true spiritual health meant escaping from their malign influences. Lagarde saw true German culture as being under direct assault from liberals, with their insistence on individualism at the expense of volkish solidarity, and from Jews, the Catholic Church, industrialists, and a range of other “un-German” elements. In “this new Germany that is so powerful, so liberal, and so utterly un-German,” Lagarde wrote, “we worship foreign gods—that is our undoing.”⁵¹ Schemann

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1478

Yet ironically, as Burckhardt was forced to admit, this desire to break the rules had also produced one of the high points of European civilization, the Renaissance. His most famous work, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1859), revealed how in the Renaissance for the first time “man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such.” The result was a momentous release of human activity from the constraints of medieval ideals and traditions, providing the impetus for the modern age. That release had obvious positive results: great works of art, the rediscovery of the values of ancient Greece and Rome, and a passion for political freedom. The Renaissance established the modern principle that it is not birth but achievement that counts. In the Renaissance, as in the modern world, “talent and audacity win the great prizes.” But the Renaissance also revealed the negative side of individualism. Burckhardt was not an unqualified admirer of the Renaissance. Personally he preferred the Middle Ages, with its sense of organic unity and spiritual community.* The Renaissance, to his mind, gave rise to the shameless worship of power. Burckhardt wrote, “For the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe ... often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egoism, outraging every right, and killing every germ of a healthier culture.” Rulers like the Borgias shed their sense of moral responsibility. “Where individuality of every sort attained its highest development we find instances of that ideal and absolute wickedness which delights in crimes for their own sake.”

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1881

None of them, however, can hope to find a foothold unless the historical pessimist has already pronounced the earlier tradition dead, or at least moribund and dying. As Nietzsche’s mentor, Burckhardt had predicted the rise of the last man almost two decades before Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche and later cultural pessimists, Burckhardt saw modern democracy as “manufactured consent,” the masses being mere tools of more powerful interests, such as industrial corporations and military dictators. The possibility that popular participation and growing material affluence might serve as a barrier to the growth of the totalitarian state never occurred to Burckhardt. Instead, he concluded, “I know too much history to expect anything from the despotism of the masses except tyranny, which will be the end of history.”

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1887

Nietzsche’s philosophy deplored the same nineteenth-century trends—nationalism, industrial capitalism, and the growth of mass culture—that Burckhardt did. Yet, paradoxically, Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to power and a master morality seemed to Burckhardt to point precisely in the same direction, toward brutality and despotism. Nietzsche’s twisting of Burckhardt’s own adage that “power is by its nature evil” into a positive faith appalled him.* The fate of civilization, Nietzsche argued, depended on vitalist forces that lay “beyond good and evil.” Burckhardt, like Tocqueville, still believed in the necessity of social rules and conventions, in the need for human beings to have a conscience and a sense of moral restraint, and in free will.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1963

The scientists most concerned about degeneration were, with few exceptions, strongly progressive, even socialist, in their political views. They were far from being the conservative defenders of the status quo that historians sometimes present them as being.³ Lombroso, for example, was for a time a member of the Italian

Socialist Party and built his career combatting poverty and malnutrition among Italy's poorest sharecroppers, which earned him the lasting hostility of the aristocracy and large landowners.* The opponents of his theory that heredity determined social behavior came not from the Italian Left but from what we would today call the religious Right, the Catholic Church and its traditionalist allies.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1970

Max Nordau, the author of the influential *Degeneration*, was a committed egalitarian democrat and admirer of the French Revolution. He detested aristocracy, social snobbery, religion, and inherited wealth as much as he loved science and reason. Much the same could be said for many of the leading eugenicists, who took their impetus from degeneration theory. Ernst Haeckel was a founding member of the National Peace League as well as the Society for Racial Hygiene, while Karl Pearson, director of the Galton Laboratory, was a socialist. Indeed, the threat of degeneration became one of the issues on which late-nineteenth-century socialists, radicals, and liberals strongly agreed.†

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1976

Liberals were forced to draw a similar conclusion to that of their socialist colleagues: the normal social and economic transformations of modern civilization no longer constituted progress, but its opposite. Modern society would not survive without the forceful intervention of modern science—and the bureaucratic state.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 2025

In fact, Gobineau's racial pessimism played no part in degeneration theory—or at least not at first. But Darwinism and degeneration did finish off any lingering notion that civilization could serve as a refining and improving process for the species.

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Lombroso died in 1909 and did not live to see his ideas incorporated directly into legal practice. But his assistant Enrico Ferri would play a major role in reshaping the legal code of Italy—under Benito Mussolini. The 1930 Fascist legal code, with its Lombrosian stress on the “treatment” and rehabilitation of offenders, was among the most admired and progressive of all of Mussolini's reforms.²¹ In the final analysis, the criminal's or the pervert's behavior was not his fault. As one of Lombroso's followers revealingly argued in 1884, thanks to the new criminal anthropology, “moral responsibility [is] disappearing ... from penal science.”²² Instead, a heavy dose of determinism took its place, along with a new therapeutic approach to social ills that spilled over into other spheres of modern life.

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Words like unity, solidarity, and community came to symbolize the hopes of figures like Durkheim, Nordau, Weber, and Lombroso. They and many others believed that these collective social virtues could make whole what modern industrial society was supposedly destroying: man himself. Lombroso passionately argued that true national unity would stamp out economic disparities, as well as degeneration and criminality, across Italy.

Nordau believed that man's true moral progress was his ever-expanding sense of group solidarity; ultimately all of humanity would form "a collective organism of which you form one cell.... Its vital energies produce you and maintain you until you die, its elevation carries you upward with it."⁴⁷ Durkheim, however, pointed out that the sense of unity that modern society needs will not spring up spontaneously. The state must provide the unifying function for the entire social organism, which the division of labor tends to fragment and break apart. Quoting Auguste Comte, Durkheim concluded that government alone enjoys the capacity for "fittingly intervening in the habitual accomplishment of all the diverse functions of social economy, so as to recall to them unceasingly the feeling of unity and the sentiment of common solidarity."⁴⁸

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Modern liberal civilization seemed to be dooming itself to extinction. Although fin de siècle liberals may have continued to resist "vulgar" Gobinian racial theories or Nietzschean nihilism, they were becoming convinced that the only way to avert a crisis was by turning to solutions that would supplement, if not actually replace, laissez-faire liberalism.

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One of those solutions would be eugenics. Postliberal sociologists, economists, and philosophers like Durkheim in France, Gustav von Schmoller in Germany, and Thomas Hill Green in England reexamined that fateful intersection of modern society and modern man from the social development side of the equation. They and their peers tried to show how altering man's social conditions could produce a fundamental change in all of society's members and in effect save civilization from itself. Eugenics examined the problem from the other side, investigating how man's biological potential might be altered so that he could live and prosper in modern society.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 2332

The birthplace of the eugenics movement was Darwin's England, in Darwin's own family. His cousin Francis Galton coined the term in 1883 to refer to a science of breeding the "well-born." Galton always insisted that eugenics was merely the practical side of theoretical Darwinism. Along with other Darwinians such as Thomas Huxley, Galton worried about the "retrogressive" dark side of the evolutionary process, but his concerns were more specific and socially grounded. Galton was concerned that the intellectual talents and abilities that made for civilization's progress were very unevenly distributed in modern society and were under direct threat as a growing population overwhelmed England's cities. The rise of

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"mass man," which Burckhardt saw as the triumph of cultural mediocrity, seemed to Galton to guarantee a biological mediocrity as well.

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At first, in the late 1860s, Galton's research met with no response. Later, degeneration anxieties helped to trigger strong support for Galton's eugenics among radicals and socialists, including George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells,

Sidney and Beatrice Webb of the Fabian Society, sexologist Havelock Ellis, and the American feminist Margaret Sanger. The fiercest opposition, and Galton's chief critics, came from religious conservatives and Catholics. The traditional Christian message to "be fruitful and multiply" seemed hopelessly out-of-date to Galton and other eugenicists, and even dangerous in a world threatened by degeneration. Like birth control later on, eugenics was supposed to provide an antidote to antiquated and misguided

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notions about human reproduction.⁵⁸ Part of Galton's radical appeal was that he did not identify the most talented with the well-born; on the contrary, he specifically excluded them from its ranks. "Rank and wealth," one of Galton's colleagues proclaimed, "inherited without effort and in absolute security, tend to produce enervated and unintelligent offspring."

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Galtonian eugenics, like Nordau's muscular populism, turned all aristocrats into latent degenerates. They might not be Count Draculas, exactly, but they could certainly fit the Oscar Wilde stereotype: human beings bred to indolence, with various nervous disorders and the aesthete's decadent tastes. Somewhat later, they would turn into a phalanx of Bertie Woosters, with dim brains, narrow shoulders, and receding chins. Eugenicists generally agreed that Europe's hereditary ruling class was as much a product of genetic bankruptcy as the mentally retarded, or "mongoloid idiots"—or the Irish.⁶⁰

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 2727

Henry and Brooks grew up in a Boston dominated by certain families of Puritan descent known as the Brahmins—Lodges, Lowells, Lymans, Saltonstalls, Crowninshields, Cabots, and Brookses, the family of the Adams brothers' mother. The Brahmins married amongst themselves and maintained a virtual monopoly on public and intellectual life. In 1815 their orthodox and Unitarian wings had split apart. The outlook of Unitarian families like the Adamses was more worldly and nonsectarian than that of their orthodox opponents, but they lived up to their civic obligations with the same Puritan earnestness. The men belonging to the circle of the Adams brothers' father, Charles Francis, such as James Russell Lowell and Senator Charles Sumner, not only came from the best families but held the same progressive bourgeois views as European liberals such as Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. They were the forerunners of what would come to be known as the "genteel tradition," with Harvard College as their intellectual base. Henry Adams described their outlook this way: "Human nature worked for God, and three instruments were all she asked—Suffrage, Common Schools, and [the] Press—[for] leading a virtuous, useful, unselfish life."¹⁷

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It was also a stern lesson for the Adams family. Like other affluent critics of capitalism past and present, they were heavily invested in it. The collapse of Boston's State Street Bank threatened to wipe out the Adams holdings. Henry Adams was in Europe when he received a letter from his brothers warning that they were all about to be made bankrupt. Henry rushed home to the family seat at Quincy on August 7. As it happened, the scare turned out to be nothing more: the family money was safe. But the trauma left its mark, especially on

Brooks. Not long afterwards, he stopped his brother as they passed in the hall and gave him a large bundle of papers. “Please read this manuscript for me and tell me whether it is worth printing or whether it is quite mad,” he said.⁵¹ Henry took it out into the garden and read it through as Brooks paced around his chair. No, Henry assured him when he had finished, the manuscript was not the “dream of a maniac.” What Brooks had done was to put the events of the 1893 panic in a world-historical perspective worthy of a professional historian. Even more remarkably, he had accomplished what Henry had tried to do seven years earlier. Brooks Adams had established a definitive “scientific” principle of social growth and decline in the modern age, which he called (and as his book was entitled) “the law of civilization and decay.”

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3026

Both Adams brothers were convinced that the forces of economic expansion were dissolving America’s unique status. Americans in the Gilded Age had become “like all other people,” as their great-grandfather John Adams had mournfully lamented one hundred years earlier, “and shall do like other nations.”⁵³ The redeemer nation was now an industrial and commercial empire like its older European counterparts. Therefore, both of them concluded, it must suffer the same inexorable eclipse. Brooks Adams told his brother he seriously considered calling *The Law of Civilization and Decay* “The Path to Hell.”⁵⁴

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3034

Brooks Adams abolished the crucial distinction Adam Smith and others had made between economic activity in its premodern and modern forms. There was no difference, because all forms of money-making were based on the same animal instincts, namely fear and greed. “At the moment of action, the human being almost invariably obeys an instinct, like an animal.” These hereditary instincts were governed by infallible physical laws, for “history, like matter, must be governed by law.”⁵⁵ Fear and greed determine the individual’s “rise and fall in the social scale,” just as they dictate the rise and fall of the market. Those instincts also determine the rise and fall of nations in Brooks Adams’s own version of Fortune’s wheel, a repetitive cycle of expansion, concentration, and collapse.⁵⁶

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3044

As the Roman people sank into serfdom and destitution, the senatorial class had to hire mercenary soldiers to defend their wealth and shore up an increasingly unstable frontier against Rome’s enemies. The Roman martial spirit declined, the mercenary hirelings became dictators, the frontier collapsed, and the barbaric hordes poured into the empire. In Brooks Adams’s theory, as Charles Beard later observed, Rome’s “whole imperial, bureaucratic, centralized system dissolves into ruins” thanks to untrammelled capitalism.⁵⁷

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For Brooks Adams, the gold standard was simply the final victory of capitalist civilization over itself. The remaining characteristics and institutions of modern civil society—material affluence, free markets in goods and labor, the nation-state—would lose their remaining energy, bringing stagnation and collapse of which 1893 was only a foretaste. In the end, “the survivors of such a community” will lack the energy necessary to resuscitate the social process: the monopolistic power of gold and industrial wealth will have literally drained it out of them.

“Because the energy of the race has been exhausted” it must “remain inert,” Brooks Adams concluded in a chilling closing passage reminiscent of Gobineau, “until supplied with fresh energetic material by the infusion of barbarian blood.”

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3068

Brooks Adams’s zero-sum law of vitality, and the deterministic direction of force, energy, and instinct, rendered the entire notion of civilization meaningless. All societies and all civilizations obey the same mechanical laws, regardless of origin, manners, or moral character.† Not only had America’s claim to be the redeemer nation vanished; the very notion was an illusion. In societies past and present, “there is but one moral, the moral of success.” Or as he grimly put it in a letter to his brother in 1898, “The form of society which perishes is always in the wrong, and the form of society which survives is always in the right.”

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3074

The Law of Civilization and Decay had an enormous impact on Henry Adams at the same time that he discovered Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* in a Washington bookstore.⁶¹ Henry was now convinced that there really was no hope left for America, Britain, and Europe—what other scholars were starting to call “Western” civilization. His despair anticipated later prophets of disaster like Paul Ehrlich. “Two [more] generations should saturate the world with population,” Adams wrote in 1898, “and should exhaust the mines. When that moment comes, economical decay, or the decay of economical civilization should set in.”⁶² The Adams brothers agreed that for industrial societies the survival of the fittest meant the survival of the cheapest, with those nations that had the cheapest sources of labor and natural resources destined to prevail. Therefore Mexico must eventually outstrip the United States, as China and Asia would overtake Britain and Europe.⁶³

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3469

Du Bois became a great admirer of Germany’s postliberal direction. He even grew a Kaiser Bill mustache to salute his new hero and role model, and he “thrilled at the sight” of the kaiser on parade down Unter den Linden. Du Bois also found that in Germany he was free from the kind of racial discrimination and petty humiliations he had had to endure at home. Everywhere he was unquestioningly accepted for what he wanted to be: a serious and brilliant young scholar with exquisite manners and striking masculine looks. Released from the “hard iron hand” of American race prejudice, as Du Bois put it, he discovered in himself the stirring of a sense of autonomy and personal destiny.

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That new sense of inner freedom may have made him even more receptive to the exciting ideas circulating among his teachers at the University of Berlin, particularly the two men who had helped to shape Germany’s new postliberal outlook, Gustav von Schmoller and Adolf Wagner. Founders of the German Social Policy Association in 1872, Schmoller and Wagner led a group called the “armchair socialists,” who rejected laissez-faire liberalism and called for a new “ethical economics.” They viewed entrepreneurial capitalism as the amoral “pursuit of Mammon,” devoid of any sense of social responsibility or moral uplift.¹² Like New Liberals in England and Progressives in America, they worried about a growing disparity between rich and poor in industrial society. Schmoller, Wagner, and their adherents regularly compared modern industrial workers to

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slaves (which undoubtedly struck a responsive chord with Du Bois). “Hunger makes almost a perfect substitute for the whip,” wrote K.J. von Rodbertus-Jagetzow in *Shedding Light on Social Questions* (1875), “and what was formerly called fodder is now called wages.” If one left the banker or steel manufacturer to his own devices, the armchair socialists argued, his greed for profits would force the other social classes to turn to revolution and extremism. Echoing Brooks Adams’s concerns, they asserted that a corrective force was needed, and this had to be the modern state. Adolf

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3918

Du Bois brought back a phrase he had coined in 1922, “Africa for Africans”: “Hereafter it will no longer be ruled by might nor by power, by invading armies nor police, but by the spirit of all its gods and the wisdom of its prophets.”⁷⁶ Nkrumah was typical of the new leaders coming to power in postcolonial Africa. At the University of London he had been taught to believe that the capitalist West, like the British Empire it underpinned, was doomed to self-destruction. He also practiced a Garvey-style charismatic politics, ruthlessly crushing any opposition to his single-party state. When he became president of Ghana in 1956, Nkrumah gave himself the title of Osagyefo, or “the Redeemer,” and made himself the leading spokesman for a united Africa. His goals for Ghana were as much symbolic as practical: “A Ghanaian nation will stand out,” he wrote, “as a shining example before the rest of the world of the African’s ability to manage his own affairs.”⁷⁷ When Du Bois accepted Nkrumah’s invitation to move to Ghana he was ninety-two, having outlived one era and foreshadowed another. He had abandoned any hope for America, which seemed trapped in an endless and meaningless decline for blacks as well as whites. His volkish racist approach had been rendered obsolete by Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement, just as his Stalinism made him few friends in the mainstream NAACP.⁷⁸ It was no surprise that Du Bois, who had found unblemished virtue in Stalin and called Harry Truman the greatest mass-murderer since Hitler,⁷⁹ should find a new hero in Nkrumah the Redeemer. He immediately launched a massive project for an *Encyclopedia Africa*, which was to be the great intellectual and historical archive for the new emerging Pan-African civilization, and served as Nkrumah’s most distinguished apologist—or perhaps his most distinguished dupe. Du Bois laid down the pattern that would become familiar over the next twenty years, of the Western intellectual who “discovers” in the Marxist dictatorship of a remote country a showcase for a new egalitarian society.⁸⁰ To Du Bois’s mind, certainly, African soul and Marxism had now happily joined hands in Ghana. One of Du Bois’s very last writings is a paean of praise for Nkrumah, in the form of a Negro spiritual entitled “Ghana Calls”: I lifted my last voice and cried I cried to heaven as I died ... From reeking West whose day is done Who stink and stagger in their dung Toward Africa, China, India’s strand Where Kenya and Himalaya stand And Nile and Yang-tze roll Turn every yearning face of man. Awake, awake O sleeping world, Honor the sun; Worship the stars, those vaster suns Who rule the night Where black is bright And all unselfish work is right And Greed is sin. And Africa leads on Pan Africa! Du Bois died on August 28, 1963. Three years later, the Ghanaian military, fed up with Nkrumah’s incompetence, which had destroyed the country’s economy and standard of living, toppled the Redeemer in a coup.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4395

The Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein read *The Decline of the West* and was thunderstruck; Spengler’s book may even have played a part in steering him away from logical positivism into an entirely new

approach to philosophy.⁶² Max Weber was less impressed. He decided Spengler was nothing more than a “very ingenious and learned dilettante,” but invited him to talk to his sociology seminar at the university in Munich. Spengler accepted. He and Weber, one of the authors of the Weimar constitution, squared off in December 1919 for a day-and-a-half debate. Although Weber behaved with perfect courtesy, his left-leaning students were less cordial, tearing “stone after stone” out of Spengler’s “intellectual construct.” Spengler was not daunted—he knew his book was a succès de célèbre in the circles he wanted to impress.⁶³ At

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4410

Just as Moeller van den Bruck was moving German nationalism out of the older Bismarckian tradition,* so was it Spengler’s goal to take socialism away from the Marxists. Like Brooks and Henry Adams, Spengler had concluded that only a top-down socialist command economy could save modern society. He hoped that he could now reconcile the “respectable working classes,” including ex-veterans, with the vision of a Nietzschean German nationalism. Together workers, soldiers, engineers, and right-wing intellectuals would team up to crush the international financiers and the mob. They would substitute a “dictatorship of organization” to replace “the dictatorship of money” in postwar Germany.⁶⁴ What offended Spengler and other figures of the revolution of the Right about Marxist socialism was not that it empowered the working class and smashed big business and finance—they were planning to do that themselves.⁶⁵ They turned away from Marxism because they saw it as part of a dying civilization. To think of society in terms of categories like proletariat, bourgeoisie, and class struggle was antiquated: it was, as Hans Freyer put it, “the schema of the day before yesterday.” A new society and a new culture required new political categories, and Spengler now provided a crucial one with Prussianism and Socialism.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4719

That same year, Arnold Toynbee, Sr., wrote in *The Industrial Revolution*: “The times are troubled, [and] old political faiths are shaken.”¹⁰ Beginning in the 1880s, Parliament passed a series of economic measures that began to roll back the old classical principle of laissez-faire.* Drawing inspiration from the German philosopher Hegel, the so-called British Idealists—Toynbee, Thomas Hill Green, R.B. Haldane, and Bernard Bosanquet—pressed for using the powers of the modern state to create an economy that would be “social” as well as “political.” Like American Progressives and German armchair socialists, they believed that the day of the free market was over. Liberalism, they argued, must build a new future for Britain, one that reflected higher moral aspirations than “selfish” individualism and the sanctity of private property. Steeped in the classical education of the English public schools and Oxford and Cambridge, the British Idealists looked back nostalgically to the age of Periclean Athens. The Athenians had combined self-government with great achievements in art, literature, and drama; they had managed to be commercially minded without being philistines. Most importantly, ancient Athens had cultivated the virtues of civilization, while retaining a strong sense of unity and tradition—something modern democracies, it was felt, had failed to do. Green and his disciples believed that Britain could achieve that same sense of enlightened community, drawing together rich and poor alike, through the ministrations of Hegel’s bureaucratic state or what would later be called “the welfare state.”¹¹

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“Individual freedom,” Green had written, “is valuable only as a means to an end.” Instead he argued for a moral model in which the person chooses ends that “we enjoy in common with others” and that benefit others as well

as himself (which, it was assumed, the businessman or industrialist never does).¹² The good citizen (“citizenship” was a crucial term for Green and the later New Liberals that conjured up images of Plato’s Republic and Periclean Athens) was actively committed to extending the helping hand of the political community to “the less favoured members of society.” As one disciple put it, “The power of the good state empowers the citizen, and the power of the good citizen empowers the state.”¹³

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Toynbee’s spectacular demise made the British Idealists famous. Herbert Spencer made one last plea for the old individualistic ideal in *Man Versus the State* in 1884; otherwise, the statist assumptions of the New Liberalism swept all before it. New Liberalism was more than a political creed, it was “a new faith,” as Oxford Magazine put it, “with Professor Green as its founder, [and] Arnold Toynbee as its martyr.” Its leading spokesman was L.T. Hobhouse, the first professor of sociology at the University of London and a major force on the editorial staff of the Manchester Guardian, the virtual house organ of the New Liberalism, which was dedicated, in Malcolm Muggeridge’s later phrase, “to all Good Causes and uplifting the spirits of the Downtrodden everywhere.” Another wing of the New Liberalism, the Fabian Socialists, predicted that the ministrations of the bureaucratic welfare state would eventually replace the capitalist system altogether. Socialism, one of the Fabians’ founding members, Sidney Webb, explained, was more than just an economic and political doctrine. “It expresses the real recognition of fraternity,” and stood in sharp contrast to what the historian R.H. Tawney called “the acquisitive society,” the hard, cold world of greedy businessmen, who sacrificed the public good for individual profits.¹⁸

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As Hobhouse put it in *What Is Liberalism?* (1910), “We are all socialists today.” By the turn of the century the Liberal and Labour parties often accused each other of stealing the other’s programs. Later they would also compete in their lavish praise of the Soviet Union.¹⁹ But one issue split them across the bow: the British Empire.

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Yet Hobson’s theory, which proved so persuasive and long-lasting, also drew heavily from degeneration theory. Jingoism and the popular support of imperial adventures were a form of “atavistic lust,” he believed, reflecting the “mob mind” that Le Bon had analyzed in *The Crowd*. “The stamp of parasitism is upon every white settlement” among “the lower races” of Africa and Asia, he warned.* The important carriers of this parasitism were the Jews, whom Hobson believed directed international finance as well as the British Empire. Johannesburg, the center of South African capitalism, was “essentially a Jewish town”; there “every form of private vice flourished unchecked,” he wrote, with gambling halls, saloons, and brothels. The Jews and their imperialist allies were “an alien body of sojourners ... destined to extract wealth from the country and retiring to consume it at home.” Yet their desperate scramble for cheap profit was ultimately doomed, he concluded, since nature’s laws “doom the parasite to atrophy, decay, and final extinction.”

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There were, therefore, two contrasting liberal images of the British Empire as the twentieth century began. One, bitterly negative, was Hobson’s: imperialism was an evil and degenerative system built on capitalist exploitation

of natives abroad and the expansion of poverty and the armaments industries at home. Like the “acquisitive society” that fostered it, it was doomed to self-destruction. The other was summed up by novelist John Buchan in his memoirs: I dreamed of a world-wide brotherhood with the background of a common race and creed, consecrated to the service of peace; Britain enriching the rest out of her culture and traditions, and the spirit of the Dominions like a strong wind freshening the stuffiness of the old lands.... Our creed was not based on antagonism to any other people. It was humanitarian and international; we believed we were laying the basis of a federation of the world.²⁴

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Curtis and his Round Table group (which included such influential men as the editor of the London Times) had consciously abandoned Bryce’s Roman model of imperial sovereignty for one proposed by one of their members, drawn once again from classical Greece. Alfred Zimmern was professor of ancient history at Oxford and author of *The Greek Commonwealth*, which described how Periclean Athens had used its hegemony in the Greek world to spread the values of freedom and civility. Zimmern’s vision of a civilizing commonwealth inspired Curtis to appropriate the term for himself; Zimmern was also a close friend of the young Toynbee. In 1915, Zimmern had written an essay entitled “German Culture and the British Commonwealth.” Like many other Oxford figures, he believed that the Great War was not just a struggle over empire, as Du Bois, Spengler, Lenin, and other critics were claiming. It was also a war to defend liberal civilization against brutish Teutonic barbarism and tyranny. Zimmern contrasted Germany’s belief in a Prussianized Kultur with Britain’s belief in the rule of law and free institutions. Such ideals “are not the monopoly of Great Britain,” Zimmern wrote. “They belong to civilized humanity as a whole.” A British commonwealth would make spreading that message its most important goal.³³ Curtis agreed, but he also saw that mission in more elitist terms. “Destiny,” he wrote, “has placed on the shoulders of this Commonwealth an overwhelming share of the duty imposed on Europe—that of controlling its relations with races more backward than its own.” The English-speaking peoples would retain their special civilizing mission in the world, but as diplomats and bureaucrats rather than as explorers, soldiers, and industrialists. Curtis even set up a joint Anglo-American enterprise in New York, called the Council on Foreign Relations, to provide enlightened advice on world affairs. Its London branch, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, resided at Chatham House. In 1921, Curtis brought Arnold Toynbee, Zimmern’s young Oxford colleague and the nephew of his own great hero, to Chatham House as director. For the next twenty years Toynbee would devote himself to editing and publishing a thick annual survey of world affairs in addition to his own historical writings. Toynbee,

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Yet Toynbee and his colleagues agreed with their fascist counterparts on one point: World War I marked the end of the old European order and the dawn of a new. Only the Chatham House vision of that new order was placid, one might even say passive, by comparison. Its general shape was set forth in Benjamin Kidd’s *Principles of Western Civilization* (1902), in which Kidd asserted that Western civilization had brought science, economic affluence, and political and cultural freedom to their summit. In its formative stages, Western civilization had exhibited the strong, self-assertive qualities of any great civilization, reflecting the virtues of “its virile vanguard race,” Europe’s Nordic stock. Now, however, Kidd warned that those self-assertive and competitive qualities had to disappear if modern civilization was to sustain itself. Individualism would have to give way to an ethic of social responsibility and duty.³⁵

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Now, after the experience of the Great War, the New Liberal consensus asserted that the nation-state, too, would have to disappear, along with its war-making powers. At one time, Toynbee wrote later, Europe's nation-states could afford to expand both as "welfare states" and as "war-making states." In the twentieth century, they could no longer afford to do both and would have to make a choice. However, by shedding absurd claims of national sovereignty and joining with other nations to promote peace, they could concentrate on their primary duty: feeding, clothing, and elevating the lives of their own citizens.³⁶ Toynbee believed that only a diminished Britain, rid of its colonies and its military establishment, could play a constructive role in a peaceful world order. This would be a world order built around its former empire, the Commonwealth, and the League of Nations. Inevitably, Britain and Europe would no longer occupy center stage. Europe herself, Toynbee told an audience at the Fabian Society in 1926, "is in the process of being dwarfed by the overseas world which she herself has called into existence" through empire. The unchallenged predominance of Western civilization was a "recent and unprecedented" development, he pointed out, and one that the Great War had decisively brought to an end.³⁷

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only twenty-four years of existence, Toynbee pointed out, Israel had already fought and won four wars against its neighbors. Military victory was always for Toynbee certain proof of moral deficiency: he suggested that, had America and Israel lost some wars rather than continually winning them, it might have been better for their souls. He suggested that Israel's occupation of Arab territory constituted as vicious and inhuman an act as Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia and Poland. Indeed, Toynbee went even further; he suggested that modern Israelis were even worse than the Nazis because "the Jews knew, from personal experience, what they were doing" in persecuting the unfortunate Arabs, whereas the Germans presumably did not.⁶⁵ In fact, Toynbee's attitude toward Jews and Judaism proved to be the most controversial of all his pronouncements on the fate and meaning of the modern West. He repeated Schopenhauer's charge of more than a century earlier that the worst features of Western civilization sprang from Judaic roots. Toynbee called Judaism the "fossil relic of a dead civilization" that had taken Christianity and the West on a disastrous wrong turn, inspiring the West's crass materialism and "consummate virtuosity in commerce and finance," and its insistence on a morality of law and stern taboos rather than the workings of the free spirit. Above all, the Jewish claim to being the chosen people had encouraged a Western attitude of arrogance toward other cultures, which Toynbee saw as the real origin of the Holocaust.* America, too, Toynbee argued, was tainted by the same vicious Judaic streak, as exemplified by its extermination of the Indians during its westward expansion and its record in the Vietnam War. Like another aging Bloomsbury member, Bertrand Russell, Toynbee was convinced that America's aims in Vietnam were basically colonialist and genocidal. "It is just conceivable," Toynbee wrote, "that by the time the present book appears [1969] the Vietnamese people will have been exterminated and Vietnam will have been made uninhabitable."⁶⁶ America and Israel were dangerous not

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The most virulent of these poisons, he believed, was nationalism. In 1921 Toynbee had gone to Crete for the League of Nations during the Greek-Turkish war and had seen corpses and other effects of war firsthand. He convinced himself that the massacres sprang from modern rather than ancient causes—namely, nationalist rivalry and hatred. The blame for nationalist wars in the Third World, Toynbee decided, ultimately had to be laid

at the West's door. The abolition of "parochial" nationalism and establishment of world government were, therefore, not only the natural tendency of world history, but also the natural aspiration of all non-Western peoples. Since they vastly outnumbered Europeans and Americans, their ability to determine the shape of the world government seemed, like world government itself, a foregone conclusion. The West would now have to adjust at a practical level to its new, diminished role in the world. Europe and America had to become in

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The other thinker was Nietzsche. Old-fashioned Marxists had once denounced the vitalist and elitist Nietzsche as the "philosopher of capitalism." However, in the late 1890s some young leftists joined the Nietzschean revival, announcing that the absolute freedom of the creative individual had to be part of a future egalitarian society. What drew the Frankfurt critics to Nietzsche, however, was not his message of vital and redemptive nihilism (which would inspire Nietzsche's twentieth-century French admirers) but his unflinching criticism of bourgeois values. Theodor Adorno called Nietzsche's works "a unique demonstration of the repressive character of Western culture" and said they "expressed the humane in a world in which humanity had become a sham." Nietzsche's attacks on Western logic and reason epitomized Adorno's own idea of "negative dialectics," and Adorno wrote many of his works in the short, sharp aphoristic style of *Human, All-Too-Human* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Adorno and Horkheimer together turned Nietzsche into a central figure in the new Marxist pantheon, almost displacing Marx himself; in fact, at the end of his life Horkheimer admitted that Nietzsche was probably a greater thinker than Marx.³ However,

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Sartre's nausea is reminiscent of Heidegger's "giddy whirl" and, of course, Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "This nausea suffocates me.... We have tried to get away from the rabble ... the shopkeeper's stench ... Nausea! Nausea! Nausea!" However, it also contained an echo of Gautier and the French Romantics, with their fear of the ennui produced by modern life. The great sin of modern civilization is not that too much happens, as fretful historical pessimists like Jacob Burckhardt, Henry Adams, and Theodor Adorno complained, but too little. The main character in *Nausea* lives in a provincial bourgeois world, where life drags on with "a sort of sweetish sickness." It is a world of "upright citizens [with] your received ideas, your bank accounts and good manners ... town counselors, doctors, economists."

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Yet Sartre finds underneath this bland, empty facade an even more horrible truth. Despite the pretensions of religion, politics, and professional and family life, we are finally frighteningly alone in the world. Like the heroes in Sartre's novels, we have no resources other than ourselves. Man is, in another famous phrase, "condemned to be free" because he is also condemned to be alone. Here Sartre borrowed yet another term from Husserl and Heidegger, *Angst*, to describe the disturbing sense of anxiety that the solitude of total freedom produces in modern man, who is left feeling as if he carries the "weight of the world on his shoulders." To escape the agonies of *Angst* he tries, like Erich Fromm's mass man, to pretend he is not free. He constructs for himself the realm of "bad faith," where the negation of the Other, which is the foundation of freedom, turns inward against the self instead of outward at others. Bad faith is the constriction of man's vitality—like Freud's repression, it is also the basis of modern civilized life. But while Freud saw that constriction as necessary to

contain man's own savage nature and self-debasement, for Sartre repression is all lies and hypocrisy, the victory of the bourgeois over the creative and authentic. Bad faith in Sartre's philosophy "arises most conspicuously in conjunction with bourgeois propriety and ... the split between public feelings or actions and private ones."²¹

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Sartre's dream of freedom, Being-in-Itself, is for Foucault just another dead end; his heroes who recognize their "total situation" are simply those rats that have been prodded into unthinking resentment and rage by the relentless pressures of that confinement and domination. Even in their rebellion they are still stuck in the cage, like everyone else. Foucault's last project, *The History of*

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Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* provided intellectual cover for a generation of enthusiasts for Third World socialism—including Sartre himself. Revolutionary violence in far-off countries would serve as a source of both political liberation and cultural regeneration. Cuba, Vietnam, China (particularly during Mao's Cultural Revolution), and Khmer Rouge Cambodia promised to turn politics into the same cleansing, unifying force that National Socialism's revolution on the Right had promised: a spontaneous, vital, and invincible movement toward liberation from a dying West. "We

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The prophetic-apocalyptic view of history also undercuts any notion that material progress points the way to social progress; or that economic freedom might be a prerequisite for other types of freedom; or that genuine human progress involves men and women assuming some responsibility for their own fate. As a self-professed Marxist and a multiculturalist prophet, West prefers a future in which a multiracial and socialist Zion replaces the bankrupt Babylon of materialist and capitalist America, like Saint Augustine's eternal city of God replacing a vanquished Rome: That most glorious society and celestial city of God's faithful, which is partly seated in the course of these declining times ... is a pilgrim amongst the wicked ... until—righteousness be turned into judgment' [and] by that obtains the last victory, and is crowned in the perfection of peace.⁶¹

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Ehrlich also predicted that overpopulation would bring intolerable pressure to bear on the new nations of the postcolonial world. "The chances of war increase with each addition to the population," Ehrlich suggested, "increasing competition for dwindling resources and food."⁹ While this competition posed the most danger for the Third World, Ehrlich argued paradoxically that efforts at population control had to begin in the United States, where it was not a serious problem. The reason was that America had to serve as a model of civilizational restraint and "selflessness" for developing countries to emulate in population control. "The 'selfless' actions necessary to aid the rest of the world and stabilize the population are our only hope for survival," he explained.

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If Ehrlich's plans seemed ambitious ("Coercion?" he wrote. "Perhaps, but coercion in a good cause.") Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971) was even more far-reaching. Commoner predicted that the earth's

mineral and fossil fuel resources would be exhausted by the end of the century because the West was using them up too quickly. To Commoner, “plundering the planet” had become the imperative of Western civilization; its dynamic of economic growth and progress would inevitably bring catastrophic pollution and depletion of resources. Just as capitalism was for Marxists a system of appropriation from workers, so was it now a system of appropriation from the planet itself.

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By “spirit” Klages meant the will to power. Unlike his master Nietzsche but anticipating Foucault, Klages believed the will to power and Western rationality to be aspects of the same malign force. Will to power was not the product of man’s organic vitality but of mind and the desire to kill life. “Man, as bearer of the spirit, has torn himself apart along with the planet which gave him birth.” For Klages, rational man stood at the opposite pole from natural man; one pointed toward what Klages called “the rape of nature” and spiritual death, symbolized by the Jews. The other pointed toward “Dionysiac intoxication” and life.³⁰ After World War I, all these elements fostered a series of back-to-nature movements in Germany that inevitably pressed their way into political movements—including Hitler’s National Socialist Party. One of these was “organic” farming, which rejected chemical fertilizers as part of lifeless technological society. In the twenties the biologist Rudolf Steiner launched a program of “biodynamic agriculture,” which viewed agriculture in Haeckel-like terms as a holistic enterprise between man, plant, and soil. As Alfred Rosenberg and the Nazi Nordicists attacked the “false spirituality” of Christianity and appealed to a return to the Aryan’s original reverence for nature, back-to-nature types suddenly saw the National Socialists’ Aryan man as heralding the new organic man, bonded to his race, his soil, and his environment. Eugen Diedrichs, one of the organizers of the 1913 Youth Movement celebration, became an early Nazi. Ludwig Klages tried to join as well (he was thrown out because he was, like Ernst Haeckel, a pacifist). One radical group, the Artamanen, or “guardians of the soil,” even carried banners with pictures of Gandhi and Tolstoy (in their role as spokesmen for peasants) on one side and swastikas on the other.³¹

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The interplay among these various antitechnic groups tended to be complicated and often obscure, just as in the ecology movement today. Houston Chamberlain and other volkish thinkers had disliked Haeckel for his evolutionary view of nature. So did Hitler himself. However, Hitler’s minister of agriculture, Walter Darré, took up the cause of organic farming as part of “blood and soil” Aryanism. “The peasant,” Oswald Spengler had written in *The Decline of the West*, “is the eternal man.” Just as the virtuous German peasant farmer formed the model for the new Reich, Darré believed, so should German agriculture reflect the same organic bonds. His chief ally in Hitler’s inner circle was Rudolf Hess, a vegetarian, a practitioner of homeopathic medicine, and a passionate convert to the cause of biodynamic farming.³²

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Many other Nazi enthusiasms would reappear in the seventies and eighties. Heinrich Himmler (who had been a chicken farmer before becoming head of Hitler’s SS bodyguard) experimented with organic farming and sponsored organic herbal gardens for his SS. New recruits in the SS were taught “a reverence for animal life” that, one modern historian has suggested, reached “near Buddhist proportions.”³³ Himmler also saw to it that antivivisection regulations became law under the Third Reich (even as euthanasia became compulsory for

“useless mouths” among humans), while the official symbol of the SS became the oak leaf, representing the regenerative powers of nature. The

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Gore’s contribution, like Senator George Mitchell’s earlier *World on Fire*, demonstrates how widespread the assumptions of environmental pessimism, in both their late-liberal and more radical forms, have become. *Earth in the Balance* is also self-consciously, even earnestly, philosophical; it claims to be as much about the nature and origin of Western culture as about the environment. The names Nietzsche, Heidegger, Fromm, Adorno, and Sartre do not grace its pages but their presence is palpable.* Their pessimistic view of Western culture prompts a further judgment on Gore’s part. It is not just Western man but human beings as rational beings who are ultimately at fault: their impulses as social creatures and culture-bearers at every level guarantee their self-destruction. By this long-winding retreat, the fear of the decline of the West leads inevitably to a rejection of the very process that the notion of civilization had once stood for.

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Technology in its modern form is merely an extreme extension of the tendency in all human culture, even the most primitive, to gain power over the environment. In this Gore agrees with the Oxford zoologist Jonathan Kingdon’s radical vision in *Self-Made Man* (1993), in which the entire biological evolution of man is driven by his “lust for new tools” and technology. Since his emergence from the other primates, Kingdon sadly concludes, *Homo sapiens* has been Faustian man; whether Stone Age bushman, aboriginal basket weaver, or Eskimo seal hunter, he is a born trasher of his environment whose insatiable appetite to change and transform nature brings him in the postmodern age to the point of imminent extinction.⁷⁰ Gore is similarly forced to conclude that the threat to the planet is not just Western civilization but human civilization itself.⁷¹ Gore pushes cultural pessimism to a new extreme, concluding that the human community was doomed from the very start. Gore’s world history is the struggle between man and nature, but now it is nature that sets the pace rather than man. Nature, rather than any virtue or vice in man, becomes the driving force behind the collapse of civilizations past and present. Other historians of climate and human geography have recently made the same claim. Ecobiologist David Attenborough has speculated that the real cause of Rome’s collapse was not moral or economic or political collapse but deforestation.⁷² Gore himself relies on the example of the Mayas as a parable for modern times: a sophisticated and urbanized culture, equipped with mathematics and astronomy, whose agricultural revolution was ruthlessly swept away by an eleventh-century global warming that brought climatic changes and soil erosion. That same climatic shift, Gore speculates, also melted the ice floes blocking the Scandinavian fjords and allowed the Vikings to reach Iceland and North America. The Vikings, the Germanic invasions, the rise of Egypt, and the fall of Mycenae and Rome—the great world-historical shifts of Romantic historiography all turn out to have been impossible without the permission of Gaia, as it were, and favorable weather. In this green universal history, we also get our final glimpse of the Indo-European peoples: setting off on their great trek not because of any inner vitality or racial restlessness, but in order to escape drought in the Central Asian steppes.⁷³