

Global (Dis)Order
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‘Decline and fall’: the ancient foundations of modern disorder

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Abstract

Claims that the study of the past can provide insight into present circumstances and future developments have a long history. In many cases, however, the past is invoked not as a source of understanding but as a rhetorical trope, especially within political discourse. The Roman Empire is well established as the dominant analogy for the contemporary West. This manifests above all in claims that Rome provides a case study in decline and decadence. The familiar narrative of ‘decline and fall’ is assumed to show the future path of modern society – unless revolutionary action is taken against unaccountable elites, culturally alien invaders, and morally depraved members of the community, to restore an imagined golden age. The efforts of governments and public bodies to combat disinformation and promote media literacy need to recognise and engage with this historical dimension.

Introduction

Classical antiquity has long offered models of stable constitutions and unifying political ideas (cf. Carter, Foxley & Sawyer 2025; Straumann 2016). Equally, however, it presents vivid images of power, corruption, and excess, along with compelling narratives of crisis and decay. Its history gives later readers a checklist of the supposed symptoms of disorder, including treacherous self-interested elites, the decline of masculinity and other traditional values, the loss of dynamism and self-belief, and the impact of foreigners and their culture. Ideas about the ‘decline’ of nations, empires, and cultures, grounded in the narrative of ancient history, pervade contemporary discussions of global politics (e.g. Chaunu & Suffert 1976; Chaunu 1981; Douthat 2020). The new National Security Strategy of the USA clearly invokes such rhetoric in its description of Europe: ‘this economic decline is eclipsed by the real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure... Should present trends continue, the continent will be unrecognizable in 20 years or less.’ (White House 2025: 25).

The aim of this paper is not to establish a historical account of ancient ‘decline and fall’ as a basis for analysis of global disorder; at best, such narratives are distorted and mythologised versions of the actual past. Rather, it will outline the use of these tropes, explicit and implicit, in legitimising interpretations of contemporary developments. The use of such tropes is one of the means by which discontent and disorder are promoted and the present situation discredited, to create opportunities for other political actors and movements. These narratives work to integrate multiple sources of anxiety or discontent – changing social norms, economic insecurity, incomprehensible new fashions, the erosion of communities, alienating technology – into a single explanatory framework (Morley 2021; Schilk 2024). Conversely, they legitimise every individual grievance by seeing it as further evidence of ‘decadence’. Understanding the nature of the authority of such accounts of the past, as well as their emotional appeal, is a vital prerequisite for responding to their effectiveness as tools of disruption and mobilisation.

The Roman example

While classical Greek thinkers like Thucydides and Aristotle first developed theories of the roots of social disorder and political breakdown (Gray 2015), ancient Rome has long been established as a key model (and/or historical rival) for modern states. It has been a source of ideas, visual and architectural exemplars, model institutions (such as ‘republicanism’),

approaches to empire, and approaches to government (Jenkyns 1992). Most importantly, its history has been taken as a template for the development of later civilisations. Even as theorists of 'modernity' increasingly emphasised the superiority of modern economy, society, and technology compared with their Roman predecessors, they were haunted by the sense that modern development might simply repeat the same trajectory, from triumph to decadence (Theodore 2016).

Republic and principate

The term 'decadence' derives from medieval Latin; it acquired its current associations only in the 18th century, when it was first applied – more or less metaphorically – to nations and civilisations rather than just to dilapidated buildings (Weir 2018). Although Roman authors never used the term, their accounts of their own society established the basis discourse of decadence and decline that continues to shape discussions today. The first phase ran from the mid-1st century BCE to the early 2nd century CE, during which the republican system – one of whose cardinal principles was that no person should hold too much power – first was dominated by a small number of excessively powerful individuals and their factions, and then collapsed altogether into civil war, eventually to be replaced by one-man rule. Many authors interpreted this crisis in terms of a fall away from the virtues of the ancestors that had been the basis for Roman greatness (Shumate 2006). Some focused on political changes: the replacement of the traditional virtues of moderation, self-restraint, and devotion to the state with selfish ambition and luxuriousness, and/or the failure of the constitution to constrain excessively ambitious individuals (Straumann 2016). Rome's success in defeating Carthage and establishing domination over the Mediterranean was perceived as the source of its new softness and loss of masculinity (in the absence of any serious external threat), as well as promoting luxuriousness through the flood of wealth and exotic goods into the city (Malik 2019). A range of evidence suggested to some the existence of a population crisis, due to falling marriage and childbirth rates, excessive female freedom and abortion, and the influx of enslaved people and foreigners. The outbreak of civil war and the eventual triumph of Julius Caesar then appeared – from some perspectives – as the only solution for a Rome that had become too degenerate to govern itself, foreshadowing modern ideas of 'Caesarism' and the 'state of emergency' that legitimises the suspension of democracy (Dijn 2025; Kelly 2016; cf. Engels 2013, drawing explicit analogies with modern Europe).

Augustus, the first 'emperor' (ruling from 27 BCE), claimed to be restoring the Republic and making Rome great again, but there is little sign that anyone took this at face value. As the historian Tacitus observed, the rule of the princeps – the 'first man' – retained the formal institutions of the old system but subjected them to the de facto dominance of a single autocrat. 'Politics' became a matter of court intrigue, influence, and gossip, while the public sphere was dominated by the ruler's activities and self-presentation. Tacitus's account offered posterity a cynical view of life under autocracy and the moral corruption of the old elite. Accounts of emperors and their deeds, such as the 'Lives of the Caesars' of Suetonius (covering the first 12 emperors) and the later 'Historia Augusta', supplied lurid anecdotes of excessive behaviour – violence, sexual deviancy, irrational and capricious decision-making, grotesque luxuriousness – that were later taken to represent the whole of Roman 'decadence' (Malik 2024). The 'Satires' of Juvenal (source of the phrase 'bread and circuses' and the idea that Rome had been taken over by foreigners) and the 'Satyricon' of Petronius were taken as both depictions of cultural decline and symptoms of it, when compared with the more 'classical' styles of the previous century. The fact that the empire's boundaries now mostly stopped expanding was, likewise, both explained by the degeneration of the Roman spirit and proposed as an explanation for its malaise.

Late antiquity

The idea of the ‘fall of the Roman Empire’ became widely recognised after the publication of Edward Gibbon’s monumental ‘The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire’ at the end of the 18th century (Gibbon 1994; Winkler 2009). Previously, historians mainly viewed Roman rule as a continuous tradition, with the empire’s legacy flowing from ancient to Christian Rome. Since then, as the great 20th-century historian Arnaldo Momigliano argued (1973), the fall of the Roman Empire has often been used as a symbol for societal collapse, particularly in European and American contexts.

Gibbon argued that Christianity played a major role in the Roman Empire’s political collapse (Liebert 2022). He believed that the new faith disrupted the cohesion of Roman culture; young Romans no longer wanted to become soldiers but turned instead to the religious life. He also blamed the church for undermining classical culture by censoring works and discouraging education. This negative view of the church’s influence chimed with Enlightenment arguments and has experienced a modern revival in parallel to growing suspicion of religious extremism (Nixey 2017). Late antiquity was indeed marked by the destruction of ancient monuments, temples, libraries, and statues, though arguably less comprehensively than this catastrophising narrative claims. It provides a template for defending traditional institutions and beliefs against any perceived attack – in particular, against the supposed threat of new, fanatical religions coming out of the east, but also the failure of native elites to defend their own culture.

Another key theme in the narrative of ‘decline and fall’ was the role of migration. Migration narratives have long been a simple and appealing way to explain shifts in history. From the Romans’ own supposed origins at Troy to the spread of Indo-European languages, migration has been used as an explanatory tool for large-scale historical transitions (Steinacher 2017). Empire did increase mobility – and hostility towards it. Already at the end of the 1st century CE, the satirist Juvenal depicted a Rome in which ‘true’ Romans were increasingly marginalised, overwhelmed by a flood of foreign migrants – enslaved and formerly enslaved people above all – and their barbaric customs and beliefs. This was vastly magnified from the 3rd century onwards, with the perception that the empire’s boundaries were being overwhelmed. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus evoked ‘uncountable Barbarian hordes’ attacking the Empire in the late 4th century, depicting the Huns as undead or barely human. The idea that Rome was destroyed by a combination of external attacks and internal barbarisation has repeatedly fed into modern claims about the harmful effects of ‘race mixture’ and cultural erosion on the health and prospects of a society (cf. Sarrazin 2014; Murray 2017).

Some historians have argued that the period between 300 and 600 was indeed a time of civilisational conflict, a ‘clash of cultures’, and that the Huns and ‘Germanic’ tribes destroyed the advanced Roman Empire and threw Europe into a ‘dark age’ (e.g. Heather 2009). But this is a great simplification of a long period of complex transition (e.g. Kulikowski 2019; Steinacher 2017), which depends on imposing concepts created during the Enlightenment onto the past, and then implying that this historical image offers important lessons about the dangers of uncontrolled migration today.

‘Learning’ from the past

It is scarcely surprising that such ideas and images persist in modern discussions of order and disorder, as the modern rediscovery of classical antiquity coincided with contemporary concerns. Early modern political thinkers were concerned with the relative importance of

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virtue or constitutional design in maintaining the stability of the state, drawing directly on texts and historical examples from the Roman Republic (Straumann 2016). Enlightenment theorists worried whether growing prosperity represented the spread of debilitating ‘luxury’, or whether social change would lead to the same problems of excess ‘civilisation’ (a newly invented term) undermining the integrity of the state, as happened in Rome (Berry 1994; Sonenscher 2016). The sense that ancient narratives offered a guide to the symptoms and causes of ‘decadence’ fuelled much 19th-century counter-revolutionary thought (McMahon 2001). The fear – real, or deliberately stoked up – of social, cultural, and biological degeneration fuelled the rise of fascism and Nazism and found willing hearers in other countries (Schulman 2006). Propaganda generated by Russian and Chinese communism regularly included denunciations of Western decadence, a theme that persists in the writings of the Russian writer Aleksandr Dugin (Shekhotsov 2008).

In recent decades, such themes have been ever more prominent in (predominantly right-wing) challenges to Western democracy, culture, and liberal values (e.g. Buchanan 2001; Engels 2013). The image of barbarian hordes overwhelming civilisation is central to the tactics of the so-called identitarian movement, the ‘great replacement theory’, and other programmes mobilising hostility against migrants and foreigners, whose values and beliefs are presented as irreducibly alien and hostile to the ‘true’ natives of Western countries (Almeida 2014; Müller & Precht 2019). The claim that the root cause of present discontent (whether economic, political, or cultural) is betrayal by elites who have lost touch with the people echoes familiar narratives of Roman history. At the global scale, ideas of ‘decline’ – whether of ‘the West’, ‘the post-war order’, or ‘capitalism’ – are pervasive.

Using historical analogies

The idea that the past can be a source of insight for the present is well established in Western history-writing. This idea is offered as the basic rationale for one of the earliest works in this tradition, Thucydides’ 5th-century BCE account of the war between Athens and Sparta – that the present and future will tend to resemble past events, which is why an accurate account of the past is useful (Thucydides 1.22.4; Roberts 2024). This is explicitly evoked in modern attempts at reviving the claim, for example the Applied History Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, which claims to ground policymaking in the specialist knowledge of historians (Allison & Ferguson 2016).

Any such project faces serious theoretical and methodological issues. The first is the choice of analogy or past example, given that human history offers a vast, if not infinite, choice of possibilities (Ghilani et al. 2017; Keulen 2023). Professional historians can always suggest possible comparisons between the period and/or topic of their research specialism and the present, however apparently obscure; the past, one might say, is always ‘good to think with’. But ‘applied history’ practitioners, let alone commentators who invoke historical examples in passing without exploring these in any depth, tend to return to the same familiar examples time and again. Case studies from Asian or African history rarely feature in discussions of Western or even global developments; the examples are drawn from the mainstream of European national histories and the ‘grand narrative’ of ‘Western civilisation’ (Scheidel 2025). Rome continues to be discussed simply because it has always been a preferred case study for Europeans.

Second, there needs to be some basis for claiming that the past example might be relevant to the present, even if this is often left implicit. Until the mid-18th century, it could be assumed that Rome was the same kind of society and economy as contemporary Europe. Thereafter,

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a growing consciousness that ‘modernity’ marked a significant break in continuity meant that more differences between past and present needed to be discounted in order to develop comparisons (Morley 2009). One possibility is to emphasise underlying human biological continuity, albeit with the risk of making historical evidence appear irrelevant, if contemporary psychology or social anthropology tell us all we need to know about ‘the human’ (e.g. Harari 2014). Another is to focus on ideas of historical and/or cultural continuity in specific instances, such as the idea of ‘Western civilisation’ as a unifying strand in historical development. Connections to Rome were imagined in different ways; early modern France claimed direct descent, while Britain tended rather to argue that Rome was a sufficiently complex and quasi-modern society, founded on the rule of law and with an imperial mission, so comparisons with the present could be useful. In German-speaking territories, precisely because a Holy Roman Empire remained a political reality until the early 19th century, there was a greater sense of continuity, and ideas of collapse, decline, and decadence were taken up noticeably later (Ehlers 2012).

Strongly linear and progressive ideas of world historical development, often associated with the European Enlightenment, largely rule out simple historical analogies, except as a way of revealing the dynamics of development; modernity is perceived as radically different (Koselleck 2004). However, these are not the only kinds of narrative available. In the 20th century, writers like Arnold J. Toynbee and Oswald Spengler developed explicitly cyclical theories of history, which claimed to identify a regular cycle of development at the level of cultures or civilisations (McIntire & Perry 2019; Lewis 2022; Weiß 2022 on Spengler’s influence on the contemporary far-right). This perspective dovetailed neatly with the ideas of 18th-century figures like Gibbon and Montesquieu, observing the ‘decadence’ of Rome as a prophecy of the future of their own society. If all societies follow the same trajectory (often conceived in organic terms, as birth, maturity, and senescence), then we can draw on the Roman example to evaluate where our own civilisation sits in the cycle, and to identify the key symptoms and causes of this decay (Morley 2004). Rome is relevant precisely because we cannot expect our society either to remain unchanged or to improve indefinitely. This perspective can even be drawn into the progressive historical narrative of Marxism–Leninism: the ultimate goal of history may be communism, but getting there involves the rise and decay of earlier modes of production – the ‘decadence’ of capitalism is precisely the moment that must be seized in order to bring forth the new order. ‘There are symptoms of decay reminiscent of the horrors recorded of the latter days of the Roman Empire’, Karl Marx observed in a speech in 1856 (Marx 1980).

Invoking decline

The ‘decline and fall of the Roman Empire’ is a history-writers’ construct, an interpretation developed over a millennium later. Presenting this as a historical fact from which lessons can be drawn and normative principles extracted is a purely rhetorical exercise. (Consider, for example, the meme of which Elon Musk is fond – ‘Hard times create strong men; strong men create good times; good times create weak men; weak men create hard times’ – often illustrated with pictures of a changing neoclassical landscape¹; Hayward 2024). The collapse of the Roman Republic can be understood in multiple competing ways, some of which bear a stronger resemblance to contemporary concerns than others, but all of which can be contested (e.g. Smil 2014; Strunk 2023). Insofar as this analysis is carried out as an intellectual exploration of possible interpretations, balancing speculation with specialist knowledge, it has

1 <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hard-times-create-strong-men>

the potential nevertheless to be illuminating: for instance, thinking about Cicero's ideas about the functioning of a constitution and the proper role of the general populace within the 'body politic' does offer new ways of thinking about contemporary populism (Mebane 2024).

The majority of instances, however, are much cruder: they invoke familiar images of decadent Rome as historical facts, legitimising diagnosis of the present, without acknowledging any issues of evidence or interpretation. Rhetorical claims that the Roman Republic was undermined by the decay of traditional morality, marriage, and religious belief are presented as evidence that contemporary society's questioning of some traditional norms and practices (e.g. acceptance of same-sex relationships or sex outside marriage) is 'decadence' and must be stopped (e.g. Douthat 2020; Engels 2013). The idea that Rome's fall was brought about by the influx of 'alien hordes' and (still more frightful) intermarriage and cultural exchange between 'natives' and 'invaders' fuels the racist agenda of 'Great Replacement Theory' (Beer & Greiner 2023; Mohn 2024). Historians arguing that these narratives are, at best, overly simplistic carry little or no weight against the long tradition of belief in them – such quibbles merely reflect (so the argument goes) the out-of-touch elitism of scholars in their ivory towers.

This is arguably the most powerful and dangerous aspect of the deployment of Roman tropes in contemporary politics. Change is frequently disconcerting, especially if it happens relatively quickly. Further, many of the changes that have been experienced over the last 50 years, especially in Western countries, have had negative results for many people – such that an imagined past of, for example, stable jobs, affordable housing, and homogeneous community can seem worth jettisoning other aspects of 'progress' for (Andress 2018). The decadence discourse drawn from the evocation of ancient Rome weaponises individual discontent and nostalgia. It ascribes responsibility for all unwelcome change to external forces and unaccountable elites (conveniently loosely defined) – either for encouraging the changes or for failing to prevent them through self-interest (e.g. Badenoch 2025). Further, it can be used to direct resentment against multiple out-groups and 'others' as both symptoms and causes of this decadence: migrants and ethnic minorities as alien, primitive and sexually deprived (Robson 2018), non-Christians as hostile to national identity and values (Vetch 2025), LGBTQIA+ people as deviants from traditional morality (Wippell 2025).

From the point of view of practical politics, the difficulty is that a national cultural problem such as 'decadence' is not susceptible to conventional political remedies. If decadence is accepted as a real threat to well-being, then it requires wholesale revolution and the destruction of existing institutions, whether to build the new society or to return to an earlier golden age – not least because the narrative itself has established that there will be opposition from those with a vested interest in maintaining their status quo. This is a powerful rhetorical weapon even for populist politicians who have no real wish to overthrow the system, since any opposition to their ambition can be portrayed as a symptom of elite corruption.

Policy implications and recommendations

It is important to recognise that the tendency to conflate multiple grievances into a single narrative of 'decadence', implying the need for radical action, is a well-embedded problem, exacerbated but not created by social media. It has featured in extremist rhetoric since the late 1960s and draws on ideas established in the 19th century. The combination of some genuine anxieties and a confected narrative of cultural crisis means that addressing a single element

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(e.g. hostility towards migrants, opposition to trans rights) may be positive but will be insufficient to combat the overall mindset.

1. The efforts of governments and public bodies to combat disinformation and promote media literacy need to recognise and engage with this historical dimension – in the UK, for example, within the 'People and Partnerships' element of Ofcom's Positive Vision for Media Literacy 2024–7 (Ofcom 2024). Ideas about decadence and decline are not in themselves illegal, of course, nor even necessarily problematic, but they can be a path towards radicalisation.
2. The involvement of academic historians in policymaking and strategy development needs to prioritise specialists in how the past is represented and mobilised in public discourse and how this shapes individual social identities, rather than those who claim to identify useful analogies or simply debunk pseudo-historical claims.
3. Further research is needed to understand the emotional appeal of these narratives, as the basis for better understanding how to counter them; this should involve collaboration between historians, political scientists, and social psychologists. This research could support the development of study packs, for example, for use in schools or with young people at risk of radicalisation. The meme 'Hard times create strong men' could be used to open up discussion of historical change, social identity, belonging, and masculinity.
4. Strategies for history teaching and the public representation of the past (which sometimes face calls to promote greater national pride and reject critical perspectives) must recognise that triumphalist narratives can legitimise resistance to change and hostility toward 'outsiders'.
5. In public discourse, characterising the key elements of this narrative and mindset as 'decadent thinking' may help to discredit them. This may be supported by the production of a short, clear guide to the concept and its essential features.

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