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COMPARISONS OF CRITICAL (Pessimistic) LITERATURE 
OF 
PRE WORLD WAR I 
& 
CONTEMPORARY 
AUTHORS 

WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CIVILIZATION - 
WHAT CAUSES THE DECAY OF A SOCIETY? 

A Term Paper 
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the 
degree of 
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies 

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The notion that societies rise and fall has always fascinated me. The fact that these changes may fall into some pattern makes this an even more important area of study. If one can come to an understanding of some facet of the modern Western experience, then perhaps a greater awareness to the current world could be achieved. Through background reading and comparison of pre-World War I Germanic Pessimistic Literature to Contemporary Pessimistic Literature, conclusions were drawn as to the current psychological health of the Western nations.

In this study, four books were read that encompassed the pre-World War I period. The first, *The Proud Tower* (1966) by Barbara Tuchman, was an overview of the Western world before World War I (1890-1914). The next book, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1961) by Fritz Stern was a study of three Germanic critics from roughly the 1850's to World War I. The third book was the immense study of civilization by Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1918). Finally, Carl Schorske's *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna* (1961) was read for a comprehensive view of Viennese Fin-de-Siecle politics and culture.

The common thread between all these books seems to point to the fact that Western civilization, especially in Germany, was either dead or dying.
II.

Four authors from the current period (1979 to present) were studied. The first was Christopher Lasch and his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). The next was Robert Adam's *Decadent Societies* (1983). The third book studied was Jean-Francois Revel's *How Democracies Perish* (1983). Finally, the work of Allan Bloom was observed through his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

The views from these authors were mixed. For the most part, they did not see society as a whole. That is, each author saw a facet(s) of society that was corrupt. Christopher Lasch believed the decadent group of current America was the middle class; and that its illness was terminal narcissism caused by Capitalism. Robert Adams disagreed stating that malaise and narcissism were "mythical beasts", and that ossification of social malaise was a real concern. Jean-Francois Revel believed that the real decadence within Western society was its inability to protect itself against the challenge of Totalitarianism. Finally, Allan Bloom saw decadence as occurring in the University system of America. A large part of this decadence was a result, according to Bloom, of not seeing the negative nature in much of the post-Hegelian German thought.
Finally, Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* (1969) was read. This book assimilated many of the outstanding qualities of civilization. That is, civilization is difficult to define because it is constantly evolving. Many of the "civilized" practices of the Roman Empire, to us today, would be anathema.

There are some aspects, however, that seem to be prevalent in defining "civilization". These include societies striving to meet more than basic survival needs; a sort of permanence, and a sense of belonging that has a future and a past.

It is easy to identify the opposite of civilization, which is barbarism. Many times this barbarism appears when civilization losses its spirit or its own sense of legitimacy. This downfall can be brought upon a society if that society stresses the negative over the positive to an extreme. The German experience proves this through the advent of Adolf Hitler.

American society today, materially and technologically, is quite healthy. On the one hand, we cannot loose our spirit that wishes to use this technology for good purposes. On the other hand, we cannot give in to the base desires of profit-taking on a National level. Informed confidence is the key to survival if decline is to be averted.
IV.

This study arose from a curiosity about the disappearance of the recent entity of Great Britain. Originally conceived as a study of empires in decline, it evolved, through the help and direction of Dr. Philip Gold, Department of History at Georgetown University, into a study of societal criticism and its effects on the decay of society.

I would like to take this opportunity, first, to thank Dr. Gold greatly for his guidance with the project and for all of the enlightening courses I have taken from him over the years. Through his efforts, a greater perspective about the possible answers to the questions present in our day have been gained. I would also like to express my appreciation to Ms. Taipan Fey who presented my final project on December 1, 1987.

To the liberal studies program in general, I would like to say thank you for the long and arduous civilizing process that is so difficult to find in our present society.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Dawn, who was my typist extroodinaire. It is not easy to find the perfect spouse. To discover that spouse who can also type 110 W.P.M. on the Word Processor is one that can only be at the hand of divine intervention.
V.

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The rise of the United States to prominence in the world will undoubtedly be one of the great epics in history. Yet, at the moment the United States reached prominence in world affairs, many Americans had doubts about the legitimacy of its position.

Since the late 1800's, the debate between Isolationists and Globalists has intensified; the Globalists primarily reassured in their belief that the United States is the number one world power. However, with this world responsible political and social position, several Americans — particularly philosophers and historians — wonder how their current empire would fare in comparison with those of the past; particularly those societies in/of decline.

The practice of studying past empires in decline is not a new conception. The idea appears to have become fashionable with some intellectuals in Imperial Germany. For these German intellectuals, however, the purpose of studying the decline of other societies was not to draw lessons from them in order to avert decline; but to simply draw lines of correlation. That is, to study the reasons why/how past empires declined and to focus upon apparent present trends.

For the German critics, with their reverence for
"gemütlichkeit" and traditional customs, the changes brought about by industrialization and political unification were causes for major concern. They perceived Capitalism as the logical outgrowth of the Enlightenment and civilization; however civilization represented the enemy of culture and the purveyor of liberal democracy. "Culture" became synonymous with "civilization" - in its modern definition - and, in their view, "superior culture" replaced "decadent civilization".

Fritz Stern, writing about Oswald Spengler (Decline of the West) and Arthur Moeller-Bruck (The Third Reich) stated, "both (Spengler and Moeller-Bruck) developed a philosophy of culture which posited the antithesis between Kultur and Zivilisation, between a decadent West and a still vital Prussia." 1

Juxtaposed to original intent, the German critics, at this point, no longer spoke of societies as "declining". Indeed, they began to refer to societies as "decadent" with the implication and example that Western civilization was decadent and, therefore, destined to decline. The popularity of using the word "decadence", in the same way the German critics had used it, became the norm.

The word decadence has emerged in our present time
with many varied and sometimes confusing meanings. To
the Marxist, decadence means the inevitable decline of
a Capitalist society, soon to be (if not already)
morally bankrupt. To the 1920's Flapper in Paris,
decadence was a badge of honor; much in the same way
"Hippie" "Yippie" and "Flower Child" represented the
"honorable" badge of "rebel" to a 1960's American
movement.

Robert Adams has said, "But though its offences
are many and grievous, the word 'decadence' is perhaps
not beyond rehabilitation. Reduced to its Latin roots,
the word signifies a falling off or away . . . Decadent
societies in the sense indicated above--societies that
without suffering a grievous external wound began to
languish, struggled vainly for a while against minor
enemies, and then succumbed to inner weakness--offer
themselves everywhere to our attention." 2

The German influence in American thought is not
only confined to the word decadent. In the arts,
politics, and many other areas, the German critics from
the 1850's to the beginning of World War I had a
tremendous influence on American thought. This
influence has, for the most part, been embarrassingly
overlooked.
American conceptions of civilization have been largely influenced by many German critics, without most Americans realizing the tremendous amount of the negative overtones woven into this type of literature. It is possible that overlooking this dynamic pattern could cause a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, a vague feeling of discontent may well result in a decadent reality. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so; and what will ye do in the end thereof?" 3

In this study, eight books were read that encompassed the critical literature of four German critics (pre-WWI), and three American critics and one French critic (modern). For many of the German authors, a recurring theme seemed to be "a strong desire to return to the past --- to a time when life was easier and more glorious." In reality, however, an "easy, glorious past" never existed; not outside of these author's imaginations, anyway. This "return to the (proverbial) past", that never existed, seems to also be a theme woven into much societal criticism from the modern period. This study will ask: to what extent did each author ascribe to returning to a past
that never was? To what extent was the author a manifesto writer (i.e., an author who offers alternatives to the present situation), or an appathetic pessimist (i.e., an author who offers no alternatives and believes that the situation is inevitably destined to be decadent)?

Materially prosperous, Wilhemine Germany was, in many ways, like the United States of today. Within the realm of science, German theoretical and practical science was experiencing the beginning of a golden age. Unfortunately, in politics, the two countries were vastly different. In America, respect for liberal democracy has solidified and the system itself has transcended any individual. This was not the case in Germany. Liberal Democracy was in its infancy and the inclinations of many German intellectuals lied with the oppressive old order of Feudalism.

Through many years of Feudalism, the church and the aristocracy in Germany had established a strong influence upon its society. This hold may not have always been just, but it did give an order conscious people a foundation on which to build its standards. Industrialization and political unification, in accordance with critical view, tore this social fabric
apart. Many German intellectuals who believed that liberal democracy did not enfranchise their needs or desires began searching for a better political answer than that offered by a liberal democracy. Nietzsche's poem from Zarathustra, "Drunken Song of Midnight" captures the political and religious dilemma posted by the dawning of this new age:

"Oh man! Take Heed:
What does the deep midnight declare?
I was asleep---
From a deep dream I woke and Know:
The world is deep,
Deeper than the day has known.
Deep is its woe---
Desire---deeper still than agony:
Woe speaks: Go, die!
But desire wants eternity---
Wants deep, deep eternity!" 4

In this study, four books were read that encompassed the pre-World War I period. The first, The Proud Tower (1966) by Barbara Tuchman, was an overview of the western world before World War I (1890-1914). The next book, The Politics of Cultural Despair (1961) by Fritz Stern was a study of three Germanic critics from roughly the 1850's to World War I. The third book was the immense study of civilization by Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West (1918). Finally, Carl Schorske's Fin-De-Siecle Vienna (1961) was read for a comprehensive view of Viennese Fin-de-Siecle politics and culture.
The common thread between all these books seems to point to the fact that Western civilization, especially in Germany, was either dead or dying. As mentioned before, the effects of change (i.e., industrialization and political unification) had a tragic effect on a tradition-minded people. This reaction can be best seen in the two great thinkers of the time, Marx and Nietzsche. Along with other great thinkers of the time, (Darwin and to some extent Freud), the age saw this new thought come to the fore with many of the outmoded trappings of aristocracy still in place.

The title for Tuchman's book came from Edgar Allan Poe's "The City in the Sea". "While from a proud tower in the town Death looks gigantically down." 5

According to Tuchman, the health of Western civilization was viewed differently, depending upon what class and country one was from. Certainly, for the Patrician class in England, life could have never been better. Life in the United States, from the globalists perspective, was also optimistic. Optimism could also be seen with respect to disarmament and abolition of war. (The frustrations of two world wars and nuclear weapons was still in the future.)

But clearly, there was something very wrong with
society, and this was the end of an agricultural based society, sending millions of workers to already overcrowded cities to provide labor for the factories. For the people who were affected dramatically by this change, one could not help but draw the conclusion that western civilization had died. There were many political responses to this new era. The most radical were the Anarchists who believed in the immediate overthrow of governments to create the perfect state.

From the Haymarket riots in Chicago to the almost ceaseless acts of terror across Europe and especially in Paris, the Anarchist idea briefly flourished and then lost its momentum. As Tuchman said, "So enchanting was the vision of a stateless society, without government, without law, without ownership of property, in which, corrupt institutions having been swept away, man would be free to be good as God intended him, that six heads of state were assassinated for its sake in the 20 years before 1914 . . . Not one could qualify as a tyrant. Their deaths were the gestures of desperate or deluded men to call attention to the Anarchist idea." 6

A bit more practical than the Anarchists were the Socialists who believed that after a great rebellion, the people would come to rule after a socialist state.
had taken power. Eventually, this state would whither away and the goal of the Anarchists would be achieved but in a much more practical manner. Had Capitalism proved to be as intractable as Marx thought it to be, then a Socialist takeover through radical means would probably have been an actuality. Unfortunately for the Socialists, the logic of a democratic government (particularly in England and the United States), allowed the eventual representation of all elements so that the grand rebellion never took place. The Socialists were gradually absorbed through the system (except, of course, in Russia which has always been a fringe of Western civilization, at best).

All of the Western societies had elements of optimism and pessimism during this period; it was in Germany that this sense of pessimism became paramount. Tuchman's chapter on Germany was aptly entitled, "Neroism is in the Air". In this chapter, she viewed German society largely through the medium of music. Music, for the Germans in the late 1800's and pre-World War period was no longer an adjunct to life as it had been in the courts of the aristocracy. Music became an escape from a reality that was confused. More importantly, composers and artists in general became the prophets of society.
The German reverence for music existed through all facts of society. Every town had its "musik verein" (music club), and conservatories and orchestras held a prominent place in the community. For the most part, many Germans felt that they were superior to the other European countries in many different ways. It was only in the discipline of music that the European countries acknowledged Germany's superiority. The great names of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, attest to this. The two strains of pessimistic criticism (manifesto writer, or apathetic pessimist) can be seen in the music of the two great German composers of the latter half of the 19th century, Wagner and Strauss.

Richard Wagner had legitimized the theory of cultural and racial superiority through his grand opera, the Ring cycle. It was a comprehensive manifesto that dealt with the reawakening of German desires to live up to a glorious past that existed, for the most part, in myth. Richard Strauss evoked another view of society. His music offered a look into the world that Nietzsche revealed in his writings. His work can be termed apathetic pessimism because it offers no answers to the condition of man, but marvels at the increasing complexity which is revealed in the modern world.
Of course, music was not the only area in German life that expressed dissatisfaction with the established order. Much of the German literature of the period has an element of hopelessness with the present order. This criticism of the existing order can be said to go all the way back to Martin Luther. It reached its most concentrated period in the late 1800's and had a far reaching effect into the 20th century.

As Fritz Stern said of one of these German critics, Moeller-Bruck, "He was the last and in some ways the most admirable of the Germanic critics, and in him we can understand that the conservative revolution (i.e., Nazism) was not a spontaneous or reactionary opposition to Versailles or to the Weimar Republic, but was the reformulation under more favorable historical conditions of a 19th century ideology." 7

Stern's book studied three German critics, all who believed that Western civilization was dead and should be replaced by an invigorated Germany. The first of these critics felt that the old order needed to be replaced by a Germanic religion, based upon nationalism. His name was Paul de Lagarde. Lagarde was a scholar with promising talent. In 1845, at the age of
18, he first spoke of the desire to prepare a critical edition of the bible. Shortly thereafter, he proposed the critical reconstruction of Septuagint. At the age of 20, he published his first work, the "Horae Aramaicae", a study of 110 Persian, Armenian and Indian words.

Unfortunately, Paul de Lagarde had his share of bad fortune and this began to take a toll on his outlook toward society. After receiving his doctorate (multa cum laude) from the University of Berlin, for a dissertation on an Arabic theory of colors, he sought an academic post in order to continue his research. For the next ten years, he went wherever he could to support his research. In the process, feeling rejected and unappreciated, he became very bitter.

The rise of the middle class and liberal democracy was abhorred by Lagarde, and he considered the alternative conservative movement reactionary. He was a pessimist that wished to articulate his views through a manifesto that expressed a combination of theology and philosophy. Lagarde believed that he could articulate this new theology-philosophy which might unite his German people.

The first component of his outlook was religion. Fritz Stern characterized the new religion as follows, "The new theology would reveal the essence of all religion and thus help fashion the religion of the
future . . . The essence of the religion of the future would be a fusion of the old doctrines of the Gospel with the 'national characteristics of the Germans'." 8 Some of these characteristics included, according to Lagarde, "The independence of intellect, the love of loneliness, and the peculiar selfhood of the individual . . . We have never had a German history, unless the regular, progressive decline of the German character constitutes that history." 9

The German state would do everything in its power to protect and nurture this emerging religion. In addition, the state would colonize all non-German lands within the Austrian Empire and do away with the two agents of dissension -- Liberals and German-Jews.

Lagarde's criticism lay well within the theoretical world. Another critic who was much more politically minded, and who incorporated much of Lagarde's thought was Arthur Moeller van den Bruck.

Moeller-Bruck came of age in the 1890's and laid the foundation for much of National Socialist thought in his The Third Reich. He spent almost 20 years travelling Europe. Writing on a popular level, he sought to ascertain the Zeitgeist (spirit of the age) and in turn to motivate the German people into a spiritual awakening.
The Zeitgeist, for Moeller-Bruck, was revealed through the art of the time. This trend - drawing conclusions on the health of a society from the study of its art - was a popular activity in German thought at the time. Another trend (that would also be repeated on college campuses in 1960's America) for these critics was to incorporate the youth of society, as opposed to the workers, in defense of this "revolution".

Moeller-Bruck, like Lagarde, also rejected Liberalism. He believed Liberalism would encourage mediocrity in society and especially in art; and Germany would become bankrupt of this mean without the strong artists/heroes to lead it.

Another critic, Julius Langbehn, had a tremendous impact on the idea of art being the medium through which to view the health of a society. By illustration of Fritz Stern, "A new age, still unfamiliar to itself, with its intellectual concerns still undefined, will often gain self-knowledge for the first time from a programmatic book, even a bad book. For the decade of the 1890's, everywhere in the Western world a creative, groping, innovating period, such a book, at least for Germany, was Langbehn's Rembrandt als Erzieher
(Rembrandt as Teacher), published in 1890. . . However wild and chaotic the book was, its intent was unmistakable: to condemn intellectualism and science, to denounce modern culture, to praise the 'free' individual and the true German aristocrat, to revive the German past." 10

Langbehn's alternative to the modern world was a society, led by the vision of artists, that would insure the preeminence and survival of the German folk. His work was not as comprehensive as that of Lagarde and Moeller-Bruck. It is a work that comes from a pessimism that transcends apathy to give radical answers that only result in clouding the issue at hand (i.e., how to manage the ills of industrialization).

A far more intellectual and systematic book outlining the decline of the West and the importance of art within society was Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West. The book is divided into two parts, with the first 428 pages covering Spengler's methodology. The second part, of about the same length, dealt with examples from history which supported his conclusions.

Spengler, writing during the first World War, was pessimistic (like many of the Germans from that era) about civilization and the Western world. He believed that civilization had reached its peak around the time of Mozart and Goethe (what we think of as the Classical period in music). The Romantic period following this
was the reflection of artists and thinkers of an age unravelling. His response to the challenge of industrialization was apathy. For Spengler, the west was in decline and nothing could be done to avert this decline.

Spengler was a writer of his time and his pessimism reflects this. He saw all the degenerative aspects of the Enlightenment (i.e., industrialization, and empire against empire fighting for markets) without seeing the emerging positive aspects (representative government, the increased use of science for good, etc.). Misreading the downfall of the West, he predicted that modern physics had reached its limits of inquiry; and he believed that the dominant personality type of the future would be Cecil Rhodes, a British colonizer of Africa. (If Hitler had succeeded in winning World War II, Spengler might have been correct.)

Being an Historian, Spengler had a broad perspective of time. When he spoke of Western civilization declining, he meant it within the context of the Roman Empire declining; i.e., a process which took hundreds of years. The west was not dramatically crumbling within that generation. It was, however, going through the gradual process of deterioration that could only end in its inevitable decline.

"We are civilized, not Gothic or Rococo, people;
we have to reckon with the hard cold facts of a late life, to which the parallel is to be found not in Pericles's Athens but in Caesar's Rome. Of great painting or great music there can no longer be, for Western people, any question. Their architectural possibilities have been exhausted these hundred years. Only extensive possibilities are left to them. Yet, for a sound and vigorous generation that is filled with unlimited hopes, I fail to see that it is any disadvantage to discover betimes that some of these hopes must come to nothing."

For Spengler, art was crucial in understanding a culture; and especially a civilization. But art for him had reached its limits in creative possibilities. "The lesson, I think, would be of benefit to the coming generations, as showing them what is possible - and therefore necessary - and what is excluded from the inward potentialities of their time. Hitherto an incredible total of intellect and power has been squandered in false directions . . . And I can only hope that men of the new generation may be moved by this book to devote themselves to technics instead of lyrics, the sea instead of the paint-brush, and politics instead of epistemology. Better they could not do." 12

The advent of the modern era made many Germans
think that their society was degenerating. For the 
Austrians, during this period, their society was in 
actuality degenerating. Out of this degeneration came 
a new vision of mankind as man, which has been increas-
ingly taken as gospel rather than being taken as a 
reflection of the period. The conflict between 
Austria's indigenous peoples and an outmoded system 
enable to adapt to the modern world caused the downfall 
of a World power.

The Austrian system was built upon Feudalism and 
the peaceful political relationships between different 
nationality groups within the Empire. With increased 
nationalistic sentiment, Czech's and Hungarians 
asserted their right to political equality with the 
Germanic Austrians.

Carl Schorske wrote a book about this period of 
Fin-de-Siecle Vienna and the intellectual and artistic 
criticism of that society. This criticism emerged 
through many different facets of society. According to 
Schorske, this reaction, in many ways, was a result of 
the fledgling liberal Democracy's inability to expend 
its franchise to more than just middle class Germans 
and German Jews from urban Vienna.

The critics from Vienna were interested in
creating a new social order. This criticism emerged through many different disciplines, but found its greatest impetus through art. This can be seen through the literary work of Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal. Both authors "affirmed as fact the emergence of psychological man from the wreckage of the old culture." 13

According to Schorske, one of the social factors that made a Schnitzler and a Hofmannstahl popular and influential is because their work reflected the unstable nature of the urban middle class. It was neither fully aristocratic nor fully democratic. As he said, "Two basic social facts distinguish the Austrian from the French and English bourgeoisie: it did not succeed either in destroying or in fully fusing with the aristocracy; and because of its weakness, it remained both dependent upon and deeply loyal to the emperor as a remote but necessary father-protector. The failure to acquire a monopoly of power left the bourgeois always something of an outsider, seeking integration with the aristocracy. The numerous and prosperous Jewish element in Vienna, with its strong assimilationist thrust, only strengthened this trend." 14

Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal both had to confront the same dilemma that was posed by the onslaught of
industrialization. The traditional enlightenment view of man as rational and liberal in nature had been discredited in some ways by the negative aspects of Capitalism and the emergence of modern Austrian politics, which allowed the more base elements in society to be elected (Karl Lueger, Vienna's anti-Semitic Catholic Mayor, for example). Schnitzler was a classic apathetic pessimist, offering no answers to the new dilemma of political solutions. "Schnitzler, caught between science and art, between commitment to old morals and new feelings, could find no new and satisfying meaning in the self, as did Freud and Expressionists; nor could he conceive a solution to the political problem of the psyche, as Hofmannsthal was to do." 15

Hoffmansthal was hardly a manifesto writer, but he did offer a solution to the detestable political situation. Like many intellectuals before him, he sought to vitalize the bankruptcy of politics with the magic of art. He succeeded in elevating the position of art at a time when art was becoming increasingly meaningless and self-surviving. In the tradition of that time of society, of criticizing itself, the work of these two authors offered little practical
solution(s). The effect, therefore, caused liberal democracy to be further weakened.

Schorske believed that architecture could also be used as a metaphor for the health of society. In his book, he chronicles the development of the Ringstrasse in central Vienna. Originally, this development was to be a concrete expression of the recent liberal middle class' ascent to political power. Eventually, the critiques of the Ringstrasse development drastically changed the traditional views of architecture.

Architecture would be increasingly more functional and less ornate as time progressed. Schorske believed that "More economically that any other single source, the great forum built along Vienna's Ringstrasse, with its monuments and its dwellings, gives us an iconographic index to the mind of ascendant Austrian liberalism." While some of the conclusions that can be drawn from this sort of exercise are valid, Schorske draws far too many of his conceptions of the spirit of Austrian middle class from the works of a handful of architects. The Ringstrasse, seen as a physical manifestation of the spirit of the time, can be no more valid than the Empire State building as a barometer of 1930's New York city. Lessons can be
learned, but they are not all encompassing.

Within the realm of art, and namely painting and music, these Austrian critics had a great impact on art that has continued to the present day. Through the work of the expressionists, the whole concept of painting and music changed. Within the realm of music, the destroyer of the tonal system (the system on which all Western music from the Medieval Italians had been based) was Arnold Schoenberg. After first producing music that resembled much of the Romantic era, he sought to create the "emancipation of dissonance". Later, he would go even further and create the twelve tone system.

Within the realm of painting, Gustav Klimdt sought to give the artist more room for expression. He was at the center of what was at the time called the Secessionist movement. It's slogan, "To The Age Its Art, To Art Its Freedom", gave a sense of the artist being the seer for society. It was their version of art and society, which was based largely on self-exploration, that would change the concept of western art drastically. Oskar Kokoschka furthered this trend as an expressionist in his paintings. His paintings express a barbaric quality which reflects the search for meaning and self, a trend that then was in its infancy.
The person whom articulated this search for meaning in its most influential form was Sigmund Freud. Through the interpretation of his dreams and his experiences in Vienna, Freud opened up a huge world of unexplored mystery within the human mind. To many, he was the greatest influence to the Science of Psychology. To others, he was right in his belief of the importance of the study of the psyche but wrong in his conclusions.

Although Schorske was correct in acknowledging Sigmund Freud's importance to this age, he was mistaken in including him in this book. His examination of Austrian Fin-de-Siecle culture included a common idea which involved the relation that the fledgling liberal Democracy had with the social criticism. Freud's dissatisfaction lay not with liberal Democracy or even with politics in general. His dissatisfaction rested with the inward mystery of the human psyche.

These social critics do not represent every strain of critical thought during the period. They do, however, reflect the mood of pessimism toward conventional norms prevalent at the time.

Although one may have been an academian, another an architect, or a final one creator of a new science, thy all felt that conclusions from their work
transcended the discipline itself and was equally valid in all other walks of life. This is not so surprising in the academic world, but for artists, this represented a new importance. This could only have been a result of the Germanic reverence for the artist.

What is most curious about this strain of thought is that even after having lost two wars, this Germanic criticism found a place in the other western countries. This thought was originally a reflection of the time and experience of liberal democracy's failure in Germany, but soon became universal in western society. The evils of the Enlightenment became paramount and the good achieved through the enlightenment was taken for granted.

This can be seen in the work of Schoenberg and his followers. Today, in most music conservatories in the United States, the work of the "new" music is thought to be a new evolutionary phase of western music, rather than what it was - i.e., viewing it within its historical context, a rejection of western music.

Freud represents another example of how the historical context, from which the person emerges, is ignored. His conception of sexuality's importance in the development of the human psyche is undeniable. But to say that this role is at the center of a human's self concept is more a reflection of a time with
excessive sexual restraints than it is a universal truth. Freud developed a theory of psychological well-being based upon observations and personal experiences dominated by abnormalities. Consequently, his theories became increasingly universal.

Much of the criticism of this period offered little with regards to practical applications to politics which would truly better mankind. Winston Churchill was once to have said, "Liberal democracy is the worst political system devised by man, except for all the rest." Many of these critics from the period thought differently. For them, there had to be a better system. Society had to experiment.

This sort of desire for experimentation did not disappear with the end of that period. It exploded in 1960's America. The reasons for this dissatisfaction vary, depending on the political feelings of the individual author. This occurrence of dissatisfaction, with the social norm, does not seem that striking; particularly when compared with the German experience and the fact that the effects of industrialization are still being felt. What is striking is that this pessimistic thought occurred in a country which, like the German countries, had a phenomenal increase in prosperity and prestige, but unlike the Germanic countries, had a strong liberal
democratic tradition that enfranchised most of society.

Many persons have criticized the present order; we will primarily examine American criticism. What was unique with the Americans (and one French author) was that they tended to see, for the most part, the crisis of experimentation in society as occurring within one segment of its social class.

Four authors were studied from 1979 to 1987. The first was Christopher Lasch and his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). The next was Robert Adam's *Decadent Societies* (1983). The third book studied was Jean-François Revel's *How Democracies Perish* (1983). Finally, the work of Allan Bloom was observed through his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

Christopher Lasch has been on the faculty of the University of Rochester since 1970. His dissatisfaction with liberal, "Bourgeois" society is, in many ways, a reflection of much of the thought of 1960's activism. He sees the crisis of modern America as being a crisis of the middle class. This crisis is typified by the middle class' dominant personality trait, narcissism. "This irrational terror of old age and death is closely associated with the emergence of the narcissistic personality as the dominant type of personality structure in contemporary society. Because the
narcissist has so few inner resources, he looks to others to validate his sense of self. He needs to be admired for his beauty, charm, celebrity, or power — attributes that usually fade with time. Unable to achieve satisfying sublimations in the form of love and work, he finds that he has little to sustain him when youth passes him by. He takes no interest in the future and does nothing to provide himself with the traditional consolations of old age, the most important of which is the belief that future generations will, in some sense, carry on his life's work." 17

His critique has much in common with the programmatic devices of many of the Germanic critics. He is a manifesto writer whose main message seems to be apathetic pessimism. He blames Capitalism for creating this narcissistic person, yet offers no alternatives or answers in order to escape this dilemma. "Our society is narcissistic, in a double sense. People with narcissistic personalities, although not necessarily more numerous than before, play a conspicuous part in contemporary life, often rising to positions of eminence. Thriving on the adulation of the masses, these celebrities set the tone of public life and of private life as well .... Modern Capitalist society not only elevates narcissists to prominence, it elicits and reinforces
narcissistic traits in everyone . . . This dependence, increasingly widespread in a society that is not merely paternalistic but maternalistic as well, makes it increasingly difficult for people to lay to rest the terrors of infancy or to enjoy the consolations of adulthood." 18

Lasch's misunderstanding of society may come from a failure to see its dominant characteristic, a life of ease. It has been said of the Roman Senate that in times of trouble, they were magnificent and in times of ease, despicable. Perhaps narcissism does exist in some segments of society, but to say it is all encompassing is a reflection of a personal view which does not coincide with society at large. Lasch was a purveyor of a sense of hopelessness that resembles the despair of many of Germanic critics.

Lasch's argument was extremely persuasive to a certain personality type in the United States. At a time of deep pessimism, Jimmy Carter, the President of the United States, read this book and deduced that the American society was suffering from a deep spiritual malaise. Many Americans believed this, although shortly thereafter the Reagan presidency took office and offered a much different view of the dynamics of modern western society.
Robert Adams disagreed with the Lasch vision of society. Through a more traditional method, he sought to compare the current state of American affairs with truly great societies that had declined; The Western Roman Empire, The Byzantine Empire, Old Regime France, Romanov Russia, and the British Empire. He concluded that of these five examples of "decadent" societies, the reasons for their decline were varied.

According to Adams, "Three of the four decadent societies so far mentioned clearly fall into a group: the Roman west, the old regime in France, and the Romanov dynasty. They were all dominated by exclusive elite groups, unable or unwilling to persuade the 'lower order' that they too had a stake in the society. They resisted domestic reforms and uniformly put the heavy burdens of maintaining and defending society on the poor, while reserving the social advantages for the upper crust ... Byzantium, though it stands in many respects with the three decadent societies --- an oligarchy of priests and soldiers, severe, unyielding, topheavy --- was yet different enough to have had an instructively different history. It was a seabased, an Aegean, and very much a commercial empire. Trade, from the Black Sea, from the Orient, from Egypt and Russia,
was its life breath; and in the nature of things a commercial oligarchy, where fortunes can be made or lost on a single venture, is more flexible than one based on land-tenure.

For these and no doubt for other reasons, the Byzantines maintained their resilience during a decline that was so long and slow, broken by so many partial recoveries and resourceful adaptations that one dare not call the whole process 'decadence'. Its peculiar history prepared one for the equally peculiar development of what was called, for a surprisingly short period of time, the empire of Great Britain." 19

Adams thought that it would be premature to deem Great Britain as having declined. Certainly Britain had lost most of its overseas empire, but this was not due to societal decadence. It was a product of two world wars and a system which purported the logic of self-representation for itself and eventually for its conquered lands. Britain is clearly in a transition phase.

The United States is also a difficult nation to judge because of its youth. Adams felt the United States was not in a state of decadence (as in militarily weak Rome), nor was it capable of being
insensitive to the needs of the people at large (as in Romanov Russia or Old Regime France). "The fact that the Russian autocracy collapsed in 1917 has no bearing whatever on the ability of parliamentary democracies to survive in the 1980's. Like a lot of general words carrying negative connotations, 'decadent' tends to pick up new meanings like lint, as people take advantage of its ill odor to label some new vice by which, for the moment, they're exercised, or some antagonist they want to blacken." 20

Adams felt ossification was a real concern for contemporary America. Ossification of malaise and narcissism within the populace create a danger if they are allowed to become legitimized. More importantly, society must not experience ossification in the elite or poor classes of society. Turnover in these classes is clearly necessary for protecting against incompetence on the part of the elite, and dissatisfaction on the part of the poor. Most importantly, the concept of decadence should not be seen as an inevitable condition in industrial societies and should be clearly understood in its different and varied meanings.

Robert Adams also reiterated the need to understand that the main adversary of the United
States, the Soviet Union, uses a system that is vastly different than the pluralism inherent in Western democracies. Another author who was a French national, Jean-Francois Revel, sought to elaborate upon this type of thinking. Revel's purpose was not to contrast the positive and negative aspects of the Soviet and American systems. His purpose was to show that the Soviet system was forcing the western democracies to retreat and that the survival of these democracies were in danger because they failed to understand the nature of Soviet aggression.

As Revel said, "Democracy probably could have endured had it been the only type of political organization in the world. But it is not basically structured to defend itself against outside enemies seeking its annihilation, especially since the latest and most dangerous of the external enemies, Communism -- the current and complete model of Totalitarianism -- parades as democracy perfected when it is, in fact, the absolute negation of democracy." 21

Revel felt this lack of ability to defend itself on the part of the democracies came from the inherent self-criticism that is necessary for a democracy's
existence but if taken to extremes can erode the respect that its citizens have for society. "Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is working to destroy it . . . Civilizations losing confidence in themselves; an old story in history. They stop believing that they can survive, because of an internal crisis that is both insoluble and intolerable or under threat from an external enemy so strong that the civilization must choose between servitude and suicide. I do not believe democracy is in either predicament, but it acts as if it were in both. What distinguishes it is its eagerness to believe in its own guilt and its inevitable result." 22

Revel highlights the reality of Communist expansion through examining the situation in Poland, the Soviet drive for "safe borders, the many concessions the west has given the Soviets, and the willingness to use force to achieve objectives. He feels that the major failure of the west is its unwillingness to see that the Soviet's expansion is not only achieved through military means. Ideology and disinformation are and have been used through seemingly
harmless groups such as those wishing for world peace and political opposition parties. According to Revel, the crisis for the western democracies is one of outlook toward its chief enemy. If democracy is to survive, it should wish for neither war nor slavery. The major concern in this book is that the west was being maneuvered into a position (by the Soviets) that would eventually leave no alternative except the choice between war or slavery.

Jean-Francois Revel chose to cite the external threat as being the greatest threat to the western democracies. Allan Bloom felt differently. He perceived the main threat to liberal democracies as being internal and namely a crisis of the university. For Bloom, this crisis was serious because he believed that the university was the one place in society that could set prejudice aside and give direction for society at large. After the advent of industrialization and the disappearance of the church as the inspiration and leader in society, Bloom felt that the university could take some of the church's responsibilities (in a society that sorely needed direction). This did not occur because since the 1960's, the American university, for the most part, has become a training ground for our professions, while
choosing to relegate to a lower status the one area of study that seeks to civilize and guide humans the most, the Liberal Arts.

Bloom felt that the crisis of the American university in the 1960's went back to the crisis of the Enlightenment embodied in its two great thinkers who gave us our two current views of political systems, Locke and Marx. Locke believed that the Enlightenment was good for mankind and that is correspondent political system (which he helped to form), liberal democracy, was a great achievement in human affairs. Marx (who matured in a much different atmosphere) saw the Enlightenment as the bearer of industrialization which was a certain stage in human development. This stage, along with its political system of democracy, would eventually be transcended by Socialism and eventually Communism. Although many of the ensuing writers may have disagreed with Marx's prediction for a post-industrial society, they agreed with Marx's distaste for the immense ills that modern industrial society brings.

Bloom thought that much of this negative thought (rejection of the Lockean view of society and the enlightenment) in American social criticism came from many of the earlier German critics who were despondent about their culture. This over-reliance on criticism
that is only partially taken in the context of the German situation in the mid-1800's to World War II is the reason for much of our lack of perspective in true decadence and societal health. "We are a bit like savages who, having been discovered and evangelized by missionaries, have converted to Christianity withough having experience all that came before and after the revelation. The fact that most of us never would have heard of Oedipus if it were not for Freud should make us aware that we are almost utterly dependent on our German missionaries or intermediaries for our knowledge of Greece, Rome, Judaism and Christianity; that, however profound that knowledge may be, theirs is only one interpretation, and that we have only been told as much as they thought we needed to know. It is an urgent business for one who seeks self-awareness to think through the meaning of the intellectual dependency that has led us to such an impasse." 23

Understanding the nature and scope of the German complaint was one area Bloom felt needed elaboration. In order to elaborate, one needed the perspective that only the Liberal Arts can give, and namely the king of liberal arts; philosophy. "A large part of the story is just the general debilitation of the humanities, which is both symptom and cause of our present condition . . . To repeat, the crisis of liberal
education is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization. But perhaps it would be true to say that the crisis consists not so much in this incoherence but in our incapacity to discuss or even recognize it. Liberal education flourished when it prepared the way for the discussion of a unified view of nature and man's place in it, which the best minds debated on the highest level. It decayed when what lay beyond it were only specialties, the premises of which do not lead to any such vision. The highest is the partial intellect; there is no synopsis." 24

Clearly, the cause for all the criticism included in this study is the appearance of industrialization. Industrialization is a dymanic entity whose importance in the story of mankind rivals the decision of our ancestors to switch from hunting to agriculture. Contemporary America is at the
center of this evolution. Our current society craves answers for the present situation but unfortunately, many of those answers will come in the future. The debate in modern times about industrialization seems to revolve around the question of whether or not our current liberal democracies are the political answer to industrialization and the next step in the evolutionary process of civilization. Certainly the German critics did not think so just as the Soviet Union disagrees in present times.

The answers to these questions might be possible if the word "civilization" were easier to define. Civilization is difficult to define because it is constantly evolving. Many of the "civilized" practices of one of the greatest civilizations, the Roman Empire, to us today would be anathema.

There are some aspects, however, that seem to be prevalent in defining civilization. These include societies striving to meet more than basic survival needs; a sort of permanence, and a sense of belonging that has a future and a past. It is easy to identify the opposite of civilization, which is barbarism. Many times this barbarism appears when civilization loses its spirit or its own sense of legitimacy. This
downfall can be brought upon a society if that society stresses the negative over the positive, to an extreme. The German experience proves this through the advent of Adolf Hitler.

I believe the liberal democracies are the best answer available at the present time to the dilemma of industrialization. I also believe that the west, with all its problems, is still the purveyor of civilization. Individual human dignity is protected far better in the west than anywhere else in the world.

The United States is decadent only to the extent that the minds of certain individuals wish it to be decadent. It is not perfect, but the important point is that it is perfectable. Apathetic pessimists and manifesto writers are clearly dangerous to a society when they purport narcissism or nihilism.

Societies and civilizations in the past have declined for many reasons. Long after we are gone, they will still decline. Loss of faith in the institutions a society holds seems to be the biggest reason societies fall. Uninformed criticism is one of the major reasons for this. What is needed in a pluralistic system is education that can truly enlighten. Aristotle's exhortation (over a millenium
and a half ago) to seek the moderating influence over the extreme is one answer that much wisdom could be derived from.


5. Tuchman, Barbara, "The Proud Tower", pp. 5.

6. Ibid., pp. 63.


8. Ibid., pp. 48.

9. Ibid., pp. 49.

10. Ibid., pp. 97.


12. Ibid., pp. 40-41.

13. Schorske, Carl, "Fin-de-Siecle Vienna", pp. 22.


15. Ibid., pp. 14.

16. Ibid., pp. 27.


18. Ibid., pp. 231 & 232.


20. Ibid., pp. 128.


22. Ibid., pp. 7.


24. Ibid., pp. 346 & 347.


Ortega Y Gasset, Jose, "The Revolt of the Masses" Authorised Translation From the Spanish, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 1932


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