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Europe between decline and decadence: The “*éternel retour*” of an elitist lamento?

François Foret

A spectre is haunting Europe: decline or even decadence. Is it so new, or the last occurrence to date of a familiar ghost? The critical distance of the “*longue durée*” offered by the historian or the “distant look” by the anthropologist suggest that today’s fears and doubts are not without precedent across time and space.

The text ‘Decadence and the Phenomenon of Generations’ published in 1985 by Julien Freund is a powerful illustration of this iterative interrogation. Written just before the fall of communism and as a late aftermath to the Second World War, it sounds as an echo of earlier intellectual and artistic laments across centuries, and also as a cry of a very French passion ranging from Renan to Valéry. The denunciation of a loss of roots and soul by Barrès in *Les déracinés* (1897) finds a continuation in the political fiction of self-renunciation and abdication proposed by Michel Houellebecq in *Soumission* (2015). From the national to the European level, from literature to philosophy or sociology, the analytical, aesthetic and moral stances overlap to express the anxiety of the loss, of the void, of the anomy and – last but not least – of alienation.

Decline, or decadence? The question is quite different. Decline refers to the fall after an apex, to a blossoming that has faded away. It can be understood in absolute terms in reference to a fulness of the self. Still, the comparison with and dependence on an Other is always underlying. Decline is about power, efficiency, performance, hegemony and hierarchy. Europe is losing market shares, influence, autonomy, capacity of innovation, among other things. New generations may regret, ignore or be indifferent to this loss of status and resources. They may also exercise their right to pick-and-choose in this crumbling heritage and consider that all what they are deprived of is not to be regretted, if this European legacy means accountability for global warming, colonialism, patriarchal order and other evils.

On the ground of this decline, new visions of common, new utopias may flourish and produce fresh hopes and promises. In secularizing and disenchanting Europe, ideologies and faiths work no more as matrix, messages of redemption and mobilization forces to shape the future. It may open windows of opportunity and freedom for less systemic but not less exciting creations. It is more difficult to believe in progress at the beginning of the twenty-first century than at the end of the nineteenth century, but not necessarily than at the middle of the twentieth century. In the last decades, science and technology have shown both their best and worst faces. Artificial intelligence is seen by some as a deadly threat for humanity, transhumanism by others as a plank of salvation. For all however, it is evident that leading innovators in these domains are not European. Dissociating good and evil, on the one hand, and its origins on the other hand is important to know if the main challenge lies in an issue or in where it comes from.

Decline refers to status. But status is relativistic between and within societies. Europe is no more at the centre of the world. Not all Europeans – especially those living in communities without sovereignty, without opulence – had the feeling to be the protagonists of history, not even of their own destinies. A small state will have a different standard to assess decline than a larger power

nursing its nostalgia for global outreach. Within societies, groups and individuals such feelings will diverge as well. Generation is less a biological unit than a story of shared historical experience according to age. A war, an environmental crisis, a technological breakthrough, a pandemic frame everyday life for everyone. Nevertheless, you cope differently with a state of emergency, a nuclear incident, the spread of social networks or a sanitary crisis according to your level of income or education, your gender or your personal history. Besides, more generations are coexisting now due to the augmentation of life expectancy, meaning that there are more temporalities in competition.

From decline to decadence, there is a qualitative jump. In the word of Freund, decadence is not the end of times but the end of the European time, the “closure of a civilization” that may still cast some fire and even pave the way for a hedonistic golden age of creativity and enjoyment or linger endlessly in *atonía*. Again, some metaphors irresistibly come to mind, from *Le Rivage des Syrtes* of Julien Gracq (1951) to *Il deserto dei Tartari* of Dino Buzzati (1940).

Freund has terrible words about the self-betrayal of the continent and its attempts to unity that sounds as a confession of renunciation. “Europe has left us, European cohesion no longer even exists in the traditional sense because there are no longer the European prejudices, without which there is no civilization. The Europeans have lost everything up to the aggressive symbolism. They lose their time and their forces in wanting to unite, like all weak things. In politics one does not unite for the sake of uniting, but the union is spontaneously born of the will to realize a work together”. To put it bluntly, European integration is shaped as a cowardly escape of a herd searching safety in number. Far from being a rescue, the European Union becomes the gravedigger of all ambitions.

This severe verdict comes with the comparison to the Roman Empire usually associated with any talk of decadence. Like all empires of the past, the EU is seen as “too big not to fall” and its complexity is associated with pusillanimity and moral perversion. One step further would bring even closer to “strong wo/men” (the likes of Mr. Orbán) criticizing a secular Europe forgetful of its traditional (Christian) values, a ‘Gayrope’ dominated by minorities and sold to foreign interests. The argumentation of Freund is more refined than that and remains to some extent open-ended but is still anchored in normative grounds that are not shared all over the ideological spectrum, especially in its more secular parts.

One cannot help making the link with some recent controversies that tore Brussels apart. One of these was about how the failure of the European ceremonial¹ revealed the inability of EU representatives to stand together for their values in the confrontation with authoritarian powers, with a strong emphasis on the gender dimension and on human rights supposed to be the cornerstones of the integration project.

Another one referred to the emergence of the “European way of life” as a fresh buzzword. Though by no means a new notion, the formula has gained an unprecedented public salience following its use to label a portfolio in the Commission led by Ursula Von der Leyen after the European elections in 2019. It has instantly been turned into a political and media bone of contention mostly due to its linkage to migratory stakes, and the underlying suggestion that the European way of life was threatened by the afflux of migrants. The priority to “protect” this European way of life was finally replaced by the purpose to “promote” it. The protective dimension is not abandoned but has shifted from European way of life in itself to citizens and values, as stated by the Commission: Priority “Promoting our European way of life. Protecting our citizens and our values”.² This episode can have two interpretations. On one hand, advocacy as a form of soft power replaces more timidly a hard defence that could require symbolic or physical

violence. On the other hand, self-assertion takes over on retrenchment. Which option would have chosen Freund?

Notes

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/04/09/incident-protocolaire-d-ankara-le-protocole-est-le-prisme-grossissant-de-realites-brutes-de-pouvoir_6076190_3232.html

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life_en