

# Decline and Fall

Vladimir Putin has decried the ‘decadent West’ as destined to fail as a result of its degeneracy. Fears of decadence are not new.

William Rees

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Ben Jones

When describing America or ‘the West’ more broadly, ‘decadence’ is often invoked. Certain factions in Western democracies fret that, as economic power shifts towards Asia, their once-powerful societies have been irrevocably diminished and are rife with inertia. Moderate conservatives are worried, such as the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, who called his 2019 book *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success*. For the far right, Donald Trump’s 2016 slogan promising to ‘Make America Great Again’ tapped into those same anxieties by implying that greatness – both economic and in character – had been lost. Vladimir Putin, in justifying Russia’s various human rights violations, imagines a ‘decadent West’ degenerating under ‘the excesses of political correctness’, triggering a moral crisis in which the rejection of ‘traditional identities’ will result in chaos.

Decadence comes from the Latin noun *decadentia* ‘fall’, and is closely related to *decay*. The concept itself is even older. The ancient Greeks believed that men of the past had been closer to the gods. From the beginning of its use in the English language decadence was understood as a fall or decline, but by the 19th century moral failings were increasingly attached to its meaning. The adjective *decadent* emerged in English in the 1830s as a historiographical descriptor. Thomas Carlyle adopted it in his *The French Revolution* (1837) to describe periods in which moral values stagnate. The concept of decadence was philosophically expanded in Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings, describing a state in which cultures or individuals lack the focus to achieve their aims. For him, decadence was a limiting of human potential, typified by a general lack of desire to excel.

For European empires of the 19th century, the decadent adjective developed alongside particular colonial anxieties. It was a way of understanding the fall of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire from which European elites drew inspiration and parallels. In influential histories, such as Edward Gibbon’s *The History*

of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), Rome in particular was understood as being a victim of its own successes. Its victories were thought to have made its elite complacent, weakened by luxuries gained from their territories and incapable of responding when barbarian hordes attacked. This suggested that the degeneration of cultural values was responsible for Rome's fall and, by extension, that contemporary Europeans should worry about the morality of their own societies. Decadence became, as the literary scholars Dustin Friedman and Neil Hultgren have defined it, 'a common, if rather imprecise, late-Victorian term that was used to describe anything that seemed to threaten the cultural status quo'.

### **Indulgence**

Decadence became an aesthetic term when experimental artists began embracing condemnations of their weirdness as decadent. Originating in France in the late 19th century, the Decadent Movement saw the *fin de siècle* as a unique moment in which modern European empires, like classical ones, were destined to degenerate. Decadents thought of themselves as hyper-refined aristocrats, akin to the pleasure seeking Romans of antiquity, and that the morally corrupted centres of modern empires, such as Paris or London, were the equivalents of Rome. For Decadents, the tipping towards wholesale collapse was a unique moment in the cycle of civilisation. Society was failing and ordinary moral values did not apply. Why not indulge in the moment? This was an opportunity to explore topics that were taboo for Victorians, such as sex, drugs, death, disease and flamboyant self-expression. The French Decadent Paul Verlaine is said to have remarked in 1886:

*I love this word decadence, all shimmering in purple and gold. It suggests the subtle thoughts of ultimate civilization, a high literary culture, a soul capable of intense pleasures ... It is redolent of the rouge of courtesans, the games of the circus, the panting of the gladiators, the spring of wild beasts, the consuming in flames of races exhausted by their capacity for sensation, as the tramp of an invading army sounds.*

Decadence was no longer just associated with decay, but increasingly with pleasure and non-conformity. The sexologist Havelock Ellis defined it in 1889: 'A decadent style, in short, is an anachronistic style in which everything is sacrificed to the development of the individual parts.' Decadence challenged collective norms with self-expression.

As part of their breaking of taboos, some used Decadence as a means of exploring homosexuality in texts, obscured by refined classical references. But when the most famous Decadent, Oscar Wilde, was tried for 'gross indecency' in 1895, his hedonistic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) was used as evidence against him. Wilde's imprisonment alarmed fellow artists in Britain and many, wishing to avoid the gay and French associations of Decadence, moved away from the label, though it remained stronger in other countries and continued to influence art movements such as Modernism.

### **Decadent jazz**

By the 1910s, 'rag-time' music, eventually known as 'jazz', became understood as America's own musical blend of Western decadence. Again, the term reflected anxieties about moral decline, America now having industrialised and become economically powerful. Previous eras had been concerned with social order, clearly defined whiteness, Christianity and female modesty. The jazz of the new century, by contrast, could be interpreted by white critics as evidence of America's cultural decadence alongside its economic successes. The diverse musical styles associated with jazz prompted concerns about racial intermixing. For conservatives, evidence of its immorality was typified by the jazz-loving high-society flapper, a woman emboldened by her new right to vote, who, according to one offended commentator in 1921, 'drinks, swears, smokes' and tells stories 'that once belonged to the men's smoke room'.

In Weimar Germany, jazz was similarly criticised as *dekadent*, understood by conservatives as the opposite of 'culture'. In this line of thinking, 'culture' was civilising art produced by superior societies, whereas decadence was savagery or the gradual contamination of a nation's culture by perceived outsiders. When the Nazis took power in 1933, jazz was described as 'musical decadence' and banned from radio programmes. The hatred of decadent jazz was bound up with racist ideas of America as an ethnically polluted Western culture. The label was also used against Jews: their fashions were 'decadent' and 'weakening the population'. At the opening of the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition) in 1937, Adolf Hitler said:

*With the opening of this exhibition, the end of the mockery of German art and thus of the cultural destruction of our people has begun. From now on, we will wage a pitiless, purifying war against the last elements of our cultural decay.*

## **Postwar decadence**

While German fascism was defeated, decadence continued as a moralising insult in the Marxist lexicon. Early Soviet propagandists often spoke of capitalist lifestyles in terms of ‘Western decadence’, in which the bourgeoisie were presented as overweight and corrupt, gorging on unnatural pleasures while the workers suffered. Capitalism was again imagined to be impotent; its moral decay would result in a decline in Western power and the inevitable rise of Communism.

Putin’s recent talk of Western decadence harks back to this rhetoric, with Russia now presented as godly in opposition to a supposedly atheist West (rather than the old stance, in which the Soviet state’s atheism was an indicator of its enlightenment).

The modern Russian state’s linking of decadence to ungodliness and sexual nonconformity has disturbing precedent considering Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment in Victorian Britain. Decadence has long been associated with LGBTQ+ subcultures and, more widely, any groups or individuals who are perceived as transgressing societal norms. In the Middle East, religious fundamentalist terrorists have imagined the diversity of lifestyles in Western societies as evidence of their ungodly immorality and impending disintegration.

## **Decadence today**

In recent decades, decadence has more commonly become associated with chocolate cake. It is still, however, used as a seriously emotive word for an emotive topic – decline, real or imagined. When decline is discussed in history, or perceived in the present, decadence is a moralising means of explanation and of scapegoating those who do not conform to perceived norms. As an aesthetic term, *decadence* can alternatively be an excuse for Wildean experimentation of the taboo. *Decadent*, after all, emerged as an adjective alongside an expressive individualism in the West, where identity is increasingly seen as fluid and self-defined. It is this individualism that modern-day critics, including Putin, present as a threat to society.

Decadence is both a feeling and a judgement. It reflects anxieties about, or embrace of, change in a world of ever-shifting power. Rome may have fallen, but the concept of Western decadence is unlikely to decline any time soon.

**William Rees** is a PhD history candidate at the University of Exeter studying decadence and disco.