

Is American Culture Decadent?

Craig R. Eisendrath

The idea of decadence is intriguing. It conjures up visions of languor, mental if not physical harems, sensuous tedium, affluence past the point of satiety.

It is also an artful term with which to articulate our distaste for the present. It imbues our outrage with a certain Puritan vigor and, at the same time, a millennial grandeur, as we liken our condition to Rome or Byzantium on the eve of annihilation. We can entertain the idea of decadence—so-called decadent art and literature are enjoying a vogue, late-Victorian pornography, Beardsley, art nouveau—while at the same time we disparage it.

But just what exactly is decadence, how do we define it? Is it a useful phrase? Does it rightfully characterize the period through which we are living? Is America in the seventies decadent?

One definition of decadence would have it that when a culture fails to “live up” to its original ideals, when these ideals no longer characterize contemporary institutions, that culture is in decay, decadent. Thus, to the extent that America in the seventies is no longer living up to the ideals of the founding fathers, it is supposed to be decadent. Of course, such a notion assumes the validity of the original notions and their right to perpetuation.

Consider the so-called founding fathers, those score or two of merchants and lawyers and planters who gave us the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The efforts of countless American historians have radically altered our view of these people. Before Charles Beard, American history was the story of a people developing (or declining) from a golden age worthy of the myths of the Roman Republic. Washington, for example, was conceived as a Cincinnatus, as virtuous as his Roman exemplar.

CRAIG R. EISENDRATH holds the title of Program Officer in the Division of Education Programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C.

The founding fathers supplied a cast of characters who could be introduced as embodiments of virtue for students in the public schools and for audiences on the Fourth of July. Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) signified the decline of this vision, for he proved to his satisfaction, and to that of a number of American historians, that many of the founding fathers were self-interested men who profited hugely by their efforts to found the Republic on a constitutional basis.

To be sure, Beard has been attacked with some success, his debunking of the founding fathers brought into question. But intensive historical efforts *have* brought down the founders from demigods to men, and the culture which they represented to something less than a golden age. The important point of historical research, however, has not been to show that the founding fathers were something less than the ideal types which earlier patriotic historians presented to us but that they were representative men of the eighteenth century, whose actions and motives were explainable in the context of a style of life and an organization of society peculiar to that time.

To take just a few examples, both Jefferson and Hamilton believed in a government of limited powers. This was a distinctly eighteenth-century notion (at least in England, less so on the Continent). But such a notion violates our sense of social responsibility. In eighteenth-century America, parishes were supposed to take care of their poor, but there did not repose in society as a whole the idea of collective responsibility for the general welfare (despite the language of the Constitution which charges government to promote it). Even Hamilton would have been taken aback by the implications of a document like the Full Employment Act of 1946, which is, in many ways, the charter of mid-twentieth-century America.

Nor do we have to remind ourselves that at least

part of the country, including Virginia, which furnished so many of the founding fathers, was capable of conceiving of human beings as chattel. We delight in going through Monticello, we admire its supreme rationality, its inventiveness, its gracious conception of life, and yet we cannot help asking ourselves, who was doing the cooking, washing, even the hauling away of human feces? Who was keeping house for the man who believed in the inalienable rights of mankind?

Time must soften our judgment of the founding fathers as we fit them into the prevailing modes of thought and styles of life of their period. But in the light of such historical thought, the notion of national decadence as a descent from the founding fathers seems fairly suspect. Indeed, the tenor of much modern criticism of American society is not that it is such a descent from a past grace but that it is an inadequate response to the demands of the present. Our society is criticized for failing to deal humanely with the poor or underprivileged; they should be provided jobs, housing, education. Or we are criticized for failing to deal with the destruction of the environment, a phenomenon attributable to industrial wastes and overpopulation, which did not become major problems in the United States until at least the mid-nineteenth century. (Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the eighteenth century was quite capable of tolerating slums, such as those in London or Edinburgh, or of ruining land, such as the tidewater region of this country in those areas planted with cotton and tobacco.) Or the United States is criticized for involving itself in imperialistic adventures made possible by the extraordinary growth in U.S. power in this century. But our foreign policy in the eighteenth century was a direct function of our helplessness relative to the superpowers of that period, France and England.

There seems in our response to these major challenges a weakness of thought and lack of energy which do carry a feeling of decadence. In this sense, the eighteenth-century men responded to their challenges in a more creative way, perhaps, than we are doing now. Such an interpretation of decadence, which no doubt carries overtones of Arnold Toynbee, might be a more useful one than that of a descent from a golden age.

Another notion of decadence is contained in the thought that certain basic notions of a culture can become exhausted, and their applications increasingly repetitive or meaningless, until a sense of tedium and despair sets in. For example, there were certain theorists who stated that the idea of parliamentary democracy had run its course by World War I and that fascism was a necessary and healthy response to the decadence of this system. The waltz of parliaments in France and Giolittism in Italy had particularly exasperated these men, and

it justified in their mind the adoption of a new, more ruthless form. Unlike Italy, which succumbed to fascism, France maintained its system, and it was not until the parliamentary paralysis of post-World War II that it eventually adopted a modified presidential form.

In the United States, many social forms such as presidential democracy, the corporation and the family have been attacked, particularly by the New Left, for failing to provide fulfilling relationships among people. The society is considered decadent because it continues to perpetuate forms which no longer serve human needs. And yet beneath the shell of outward conformity to old patterns there is a fair amount of ferment. New forms are being invented—economic cooperatives, familial communes, free schools, various forms of participatory democracy. Those who compare the United States with the Roman Empire here have a useful analogy. The early Christian Church is indeed comparable to certain social forms being developed by young people today, and its relation to the Establishment is not too dissimilar.

The Marxist critique of modern society still carries a sting, despite the evolution in capitalist society since *Das Kapital* appeared. Bourgeois society is still, by its definition, increasingly decadent. There is still contradiction between the socialization of labor and the relative concentration of wealth or control of the means of production; there is still a contradiction between the efficiency of capitalistic production and the poverty of at least certain segments of the working force; there is still a contradiction between the claims of those in the Establishment to the universal truths of their laws and morals, and the maintenance of their privileged position; and there is still a contradiction in a system which relies on war production and semi-colonial markets to dispose of its surplus. The system has undoubtedly widened its benefits, rather than narrowed them, since Marx wrote, and the franchise has given the proletariat power which Marx did not predict. But the Marxist critique is still the underlying rationale for much of contemporary criticism.

By claiming to speak for Marxism, and by mixing elements of Marxism with Stalinist statism, the Soviets have substituted the party line for Marxism, to the latter's discredit. Consider the Soviet view of art, elements of which, incidentally, sound as much like Tolstoy as Marx. Theoretically, the Communist Party seeks to have art created which will assist it in its task of constructing a Communist society. The area of Party control is total—political, economic, social, familial, cultural, and ultimately involves the creation of what is known as "Communist consciousness." The artist, in his complete identification with the Party and its goals (*partiinost*), must represent this "Communist consciousness" in a most sensitive way.

In addition to conforming to Party policies, Soviet art must have *narodnost*. "Art," Lenin declared, "belongs to the people. It must penetrate with its deepest roots into the very midst of the laboring masses. It must be intelligible to these masses and be loved by them." In the Soviet Union, this has meant that since the 1920's there has been an absence of formal experimentation in the arts. Literature, for example, has been concerned with direct, discernible, unambiguous, "concrete" reality. Moreover, it has been concentrated on that sphere of reality most under direct Party control—the creation of socialist economic and social arrangements, e.g., Party and Komsomol life, factories, *kolkhozes* and, during the war, military operations. In a loose sense, this realistic style with its preference for socialist themes is known as "socialist realism." Even today, even after the thaw in 1956, this is still the standard of acceptable work.

Innovators in the West have been honored for expanding human consciousness beyond previously revealed limits. It seems clear that the leaders of the Soviet Union regard such expansion as decadence; they do not wish the creation of awareness among its citizens beyond the objects of the Party's more mundane social and economic planning. The capacity to see beyond becomes a tendency to belittle and, in any case, diverts energy from "the business at hand."

Lenin also said that art "must unite the feelings, thought and will of these masses; it must elevate them." At first blush, this moral and ideological role of art seems to contrast with its role of representing reality. For what should be is different from what is. However, the essence of *ideinost* is an analysis of the present with a program for the future. Writers who have *ideinost* are alone capable of clearly seeing real social relations—what is; Marxism-Leninism as interpreted by the Party also gives them the goal of policy—what should be. The Party Platform of 1961 gives a remarkably clear statement of how to combine these aspects of the present and future when it says: "The highroad of literature and art lies through the strengthening of links with the life of the people, through faithful and highly artistic depiction of the richness and versatility of socialist reality, inspired and vivid portrayal of all that is *new and genuinely Communist*, and exposure of all that hinders the progress of society." A writer should not be too negative; he should not allow his conception of things to produce too black a picture. Negative images should be used sparingly, he must use one only in order to affirm the new world for which he is fighting in the front ranks of the people. Likewise, an artist must be careful that his characters be representative—they must have general political significance, and if he uses negative images in an unsparing manner and not for the purpose of improvement, he will answer for it, as Soviet writers have done from Babel to Bukovsky.

This conception of art has been rejected in the West. We have accepted a conception which one scholar, Richard Pipes, described thus:

Belles-lettres and poetry, in particular, are inherently concerned with personal experiences; they are introspective and individualistic. Psychologically, therefore, they tend to conflict with politics, which operate with abstract, intellectualized categories, not directly related to personal experience. . . . In the ultimate scale of values, he [the poet] cannot admit that someone else's "truths" are more real or more valid than his own, that considerations which lack an exact counterpart in the world of individual experience may take precedence, and even less that the problems which trouble him are capable of solution by legislative or diplomatic action.

The artist in capitalistic society is supposedly decadent not only because, like the theoretical entrepreneur, he pursues his own interests but because he also works for himself artistically. The West and, more specifically, the United States, has produced its social realist artists and writers, its Steinbecks, Dos Passoses and Ben Shahns, who have been concerned with promoting the social good through their art. But in general this has been a minority strain, and almost all of these have rejected the premise that anyone could tell them what to do. They have, rather, gone ahead on the basis of a faith in the redeeming qualities of personal vision. It is simply extraordinary how deeply most American artists believe in the sanctity of the individual vision and in their need to resist anything that looks like collective dictation.

Their intense individualism results in styles which are not always accessible to a mass audience, to statements which are in conflict with the prevailing ideology of the country or of the particular political administration. But that is their task, as they conceive it—for the validity of individual experience and artistic creation which interprets that experience are the final tests of life. It is, they believe, the society's task to make possible such freedom of thought and expression; and any society which attempts to infringe on it will answer for it.

From a Marxist point of view, the "contradiction" between our artists and the rest of our society has enabled the United States to be a vital producer of culture. Allowing for a fair amount of subjectivity, one could say, for example, that American Abstract Expressionism was the leading art movement of the world in the period 1945-1960. Pollock, Kline, deKooning, Rothko, Tomlin, Hofmann, Motherwell and a dozen others created a school of painting which was forceful, new and authentic and which deeply influenced the style of painting in every country where it was allowed to be introduced.

It is true that in the last ten years there has been a falling off in artistic quality (literature and music

have also suffered, although poetry has had a marked resurgence). One reason for this may be that it is taking some time to exhaust Abstract Expressionism but that the ideas have run out, at least in the forms in which they were expressed. Then, too, op art, pop, certain kinds of kinesthetic art, computer art, happenings, minimalism and environmental art are still being explored.

On the basis of artistic production it is difficult to argue that we are or are not in a state of cultural decline. However, there is still the question of whether or not American society itself is becoming decadent. There is perhaps an over-indulgence in material goods, a debauching of taste

through the mass media, not to speak of the latent contradictions of our society, the existence of possibly moribund social and political forms, or our failures to respond to the challenges of our time. But vital we still are. The sixties were as tense and vital a period as any in our history, perhaps too much so for some. One has only to come home from Europe to feel the enormous pulsating vitality of this country. And we are increasingly aware of at least some demands of our time, our place. Such vitality, such awareness are necessary conditions for coping with our manifold problems. If we have sufficient imagination and can summon up the will to resolve these problems we will not decline, will not slip into decadence. Ah, yes, "If," as Kipling said.