

**THE DECADENT SOCIETY: HOW WE BECAME
A VICTIM OF OUR OWN SUCCESS**

(ROSS DOUTHAT)

March 28, 2020

Almost always one reads a book of future-looking political theory long before or long after its substance has been proven or disproven. It is quite another experience to observe theory offered just yesterday as it morphs today into reality. So it is with *The Decadent Society*, released in February, a month ago. It sharply identifies our problems, and speaks abstractly of possible futures for both America and the rest of the world, in which our problems are solved, or not. But all changed futures require a mechanism of change, that in February we were lacking. Now, the Wuhan coronavirus, and, much more importantly, its knock-on effects, have delivered a possible mechanism, and a changed future rises in the shadows. History has, perhaps, returned.

That's not to say this book is very good. It's not. I mean, it's not bad, and the author, Ross Douthat, a prominent conservative, is an excellent writer, but he says nothing that I and many others have not been saying for years, and he is trapped within the rusty confines of High Conservatism, itself decadent under his own definition. Moreover, iron bars may not make a cage (as the Cavalier poet Richard Lovelace, a distant collateral ancestor of mine, said), but being the only conservative employee of the *New York Times*, whether Douthat admits it to himself or not, makes for house arrest, where the author makes sure his thought stays within a narrow band. Still, Douthat is a smart man, and his analysis is a starting place for bolder lines of thought.

Douthat uses Jacques Barzun's classic definition of decadence, which is hard to boil down to a single sentence, but Douthat distills it to "economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of prosperity and technological development." Decadence in Barzun's definition is not eye-catching, dissolute behavior or massive inequality. In fact decadent periods are often periods of considerable activity—just not original or useful activity. "Repetition is more the norm than innovation . . . intellectual life goes in circles." As Douthat notes, this definition, by emphasizing economics and observable repetition, allows some degree of quantification and precision, and

largely takes out moral elements. That's not to say that decadent periods don't often show moral degeneracy, but in this view degeneracy is not the main marker of decadence, and is essentially ignored by Douthat (though, strangely, the cover image is one of gluttony).

To justify his diagnosis of degeneracy, Douthat identifies four symptoms: economic stagnation; human sterility; institutional sclerosis; and cultural repetition. Each of these gets a chapter, taking up half the book total, and then Douthat turns to what might change, and how we might escape decadence. By "we," Douthat means Western civilization, primarily America and secondarily Europe, although he nods occasionally to two Asian cultures now advanced because they have adopted elements of Western civilization, Japan and South Korea. As we'll see, Douthat does a good job showing that "we" are decadent under Barzun's definition, although it would be a more interesting (and much longer) book if he tied this analysis to other societies in history. We can see no forward movement, no future, when our society is viewed with a clear eye. Trying to cover all the bases, Douthat looks high and low for a silver lining, arguing that perhaps living like this, eking out the ruin in a nation, isn't really so bad. It's better, he says, than submitting to violence and war for their own sake, in the manner of some pre-World War I thinkers. But as we will see, that is a false dichotomy, and it's pretty clear Douthat thinks so too.

A key element is missing in Douthat's analysis, however. He ignores how we got here. He doesn't say it was inevitable; he does not claim there is a cycle in every human society. Instead, he treats the West's descent to decadence as a passive event, something that somehow happened to us for unspecified, perhaps unknowable, reasons. He ignores the possibility that it was an active event, something that was done to us by specified people for specified reasons. Or, put another way: did we fall, or were we pushed? You won't find Douthat addressing that question.

Douthat begins where I, only last week, was focused—1969, the apogee of America. That apogee seemed, Douthat accurately points out, like a beginning, the foothills of the much greater mountains that America would soon conquer. It is obvious in retrospect that the rot was far advanced even then, but not surprising that escaped most people at the time. Douthat focuses on the landing of men on the Moon; this focus prefigures that Douthat's solution for decadence is a renewed

outward-looking vision, celebrating, as I have said, the works of Man under the eyes of God.

This is not a history of the space program, however. Douthat's initial point is that very soon after 1969, we became resigned to the closing of all frontiers. He speaks of the search for "God and gold and glory," making the interesting claim that the "ideology of exploration and discovery" in the modern, industrialized world offered "a new form of consolation to replace what faith and tribe and family and hierarchy had once supplied." In Douthat's telling, it substituted for the impermanence of the modern world. I am not sure these things are properly contrasted; the great earlier ages of exploration and discovery combined the two very successfully, and most who sought the American frontier were very much about faith and family, and hierarchy too, if uncomfortable with distant overlords. And the space program itself was a perfect example of a hierarchy, one based on competence—just look at photos of astronauts or of Mission Control. Douthat's claim has a superficial appeal, but upon a little thought it's obvious that accomplishing the new does not necessarily result in evanescence, and I suspect a close historical analysis would disprove Douthat's claim entirely. Regardless, America did not seem decadent in 1969.

Next we get four chapters on the four symptoms of decadence, beginning with economic stagnation, or more precisely, stagnation of real economic endeavor that actually adds value. Douthat adduces large businesses that turned out to be frauds or hollow shells, such as Theranos and Uber. His point isn't that all businesses are frauds; it's that when a rich society can't find legitimate and high-return places to invest wealth, the consequence is stagnation, the cessation of forward movement. It becomes "let's-pretendism." The glossy pseudo-success of Silicon Valley today conceals a laundry list of massive defects and problems pointed out by other writers, from Robert Gordon (on the modern failure to truly innovate) to David Graeber (on jobs that are not real) to numerous writers on income stagnation in real terms for the masses and the decline in social mobility (Richard Reeves; James Bloodworth).

Douthat doesn't claim there is one single driver of this stagnation. He cites analyses ranging from libertarians through Thomas Piketty (though it doesn't lend confidence that he keeps citing the very lightweight

Tyler Cowen, who for some reason many on the Right view as some kind of guru), and settles on some combination of aging populations, debt overhang, limits to further education, environmental limitations (making here one of his many required obeisances to the gospel of global warming), and, perhaps most of all, the failure of technological innovation. He points out that, the internet aside, our world is not very different than the world of several decades ago, but that world was vastly different than the world of a few decades before it. This is partially cloaked by modern ultra-high speed communication, but that is not a real difference. Nor is there any sign whatsoever, as I am also very fond of pointing out, that any of the marvels we are promised are imminent are, in fact, imminent, from driverless cars to artificial intelligence to life extension. Far more likely that in thirty years nothing much will have changed.

Following is sterility, human sterility. Here Douthat summarizes what any realist knows—that our actual problem is underpopulation, not overpopulation. I covered this in great detail in my review of Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson's *Empty Planet* and will not repeat it here; Douthat does a competent job of summarizing the problem and linking it to his overall theme. He clearly points out all the bad things immediately resulting from an aging population, most of all a total lack of the dynamism that is the lifeblood of any society that is going anywhere. And by the end of the chapter, he nods in the direction of the truth—a society that is focused on nothing greater than maximizing individual choice will, given modern birth limiting options, always die, and die quickly. He does not, however, advert to that this is an active choice, not something that passively happened to us, and the reader begins to sense that Douthat is either hiding or ignoring a key truth that explains his analysis—that we bought into, and allowed ourselves to be controlled by, a destructive ideology.

Next is sclerosis, in essence, the inability of our institutions, primarily our government, to do anything competently. We can all agree this is true, and it's unnecessary to recount examples. But why is this? Again, Douthat treats it as something that just happened. Douthat ignores that increasing sclerosis is, over time, directly correlated with the expansion of the state demanded by leftist ideology, while at the same time non-governmental institutions have been deliberately reduced

to almost complete irrelevance except as arms of the government or tools of leftist programs. He says nothing about the administrative state, a creation and instrument of the Left. Worst of all, he makes claims that suggest he either has no idea what he is talking about or is bending over backward to protect the Left from its primary responsibility, such as making the bizarre claim, offering no examples because there are no possible examples, “[T]he conservative movement has become comfortable with judicial activism in reverse; with using judicial power aggressively on issues where conservative legislators have either been defeated or (more often) simply fear to tread.” I wish that were true, but it’s not, even a little. And I have nearly as much contempt for the Republicans in Congress as for Democrats, but as we have seen this week in Nancy Pelosi holding hostage the “relief” bill for the Chinese coronavirus with a laundry list of unrelated leftist demands, and that the Left benefits from legislative sclerosis by its control of the judiciary and the administrative state, institutional sclerosis is a problem that could be largely solved by smashing the power of the Left. The reader begins to realize who the active agent of our decadence is—the modern Left, and its Enlightenment values of unlimited autonomic individualism and coerced equality.

Finally, we discuss cultural repetition. Douthat makes the point often made (he makes almost zero original points in this book, but he does not claim he is making original points), that the world of 2020 is basically indistinguishable from the world of 1990, but that any other thirty-year gap in modern American history shows massive changes, both visually and under the surface. True enough, but he glosses over that our culture’s descent in the past fifty years is again directly correlated with the rise to total cultural dominance of the Left. From his Acela corridor perch, Douthat, a movie and television buff, can’t see this. (Oddly, he entirely ignores high culture, such as music and architecture, though of course those have also been destroyed by leftist ideology.) Douthat makes farcical statements, such as that among those pioneering “a richer and more daring approach to televised storytelling” is—Lena Dunham. He claims that Princess Leia using a blaster in *Star Wars* is the same thing as the men clad in female bodies who now dominate all action movies. He tells us that five percent of the population is “homosexual or transgender”—which is false, and by including the mentally ill “transgender” he

signals his burning of incense at the most recently erected progressive altar. He claims, with a straight face, that “the first season of *Mad Men*” is a “primary source,” apparently not realizing the entire series is slick leftist propaganda. Winding up, Douthat points out that the culture war is mostly stalemated for the past few decades, since 1975 or so, hence we are repeating our past cultural battles. True enough, but what he fails to point out is that that stalemate has been a setting in amber of total victories by the Left, the only changes in which have been to add fresh victories for the Left. So, yes, we do have cultural repetition—but that’s because we have calcified Left victories. The obvious answer, as with sclerosis, is that the Left is to blame, and if we destroy the Left, we increase our chances of being able to restore the future.

So in these four chapters, Douthat proves, adequately enough, that our society is decadent. But it appears stable, or appeared so last month. Douthat next turns to why that is, when decadence is typically seen as leading to instability. He ascribes it to drugs, pornography, and the internet. Yes, political fighting appears vicious, but it is mostly playacting. This is not the 1930s. Nobody is manning the barricades or fighting in the streets. The likely result, short and medium term, Douthat says, is a Huxley-ite soft despotism, where the government works to make us feel safe, and nobody even dreams, much less dares, great things. Think China without the annoying Chinese cultural attitudes and behaviors, like eating bats. Think, instead, James Poulos’s “pink police state,” a decayed world where the only thing that cannot be tolerated is intolerance, or rocking the boat for others’ desires, whatever those may be.

This is a reasonable vision. But again, Douthat bizarrely claims that this “coercion to freedom,” in Ryszard Legutko’s words, is some kind of organic modern happenstance, not a deliberate program of the Left. He never ascribes any malignity to the leftist program that has been so successful over the past hundred (really, two hundred) years, and wildly successful over the past sixty. In Douthat’s Stockholm Syndrome-tinged vision, campus repression is merely something colleges “groped their way to . . . out of a kind of commercial necessity,” and campus speech rules are only “mildly repressive.” Right-wing engineers are “occasionally fired for wrongthink,” rather than every major business totally repressing all socially conservative speech. Western Europe’s violent punitive measures against any activity that challenges Left wholesale

importation of alien invaders are neutrally “aimed at policing the tensions between natives and new arrivals.” In Douthat’s fantasy, the pink police state affects everyone equally and in the same way, for both Left and Right are completely equal in the degree and types of censorship and persecution they suffer. This is ludicrous, and everyone paying attention knows it. Yet again—smash the Left, and you may not solve decadence, but life will get a lot better immediately, and there will be a lot more options for renewal.

But what is Douthat’s solution? It’s not the barbarians, given as an answer in C. P. Cavafy’s famous poem, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” where a decadent people are disappointed when the barbarians fail to show up to sack the city, for “They were, those people, a kind of solution.” Douthat sees no force capable of “overthrowing the liberal order and inheriting the world.” Not Islam; it’s not coherent and it’s decaying on its own (more accurately, it’s been decaying for twelve hundred years). Not Russia; it’s a fake throwback to the Tsars. Not the illiberal democracies of Poland and Hungary; they are not a real alternative, and won’t be unless they remake themselves as “Christian monarchies” (hmmmm . . .). Not the Chinese; they’re sterile, and going nowhere. Not populist movements in the developed world; they are “disturbances, not transformations.” Yes, maybe “the right leader, the right crisis, the right combination of man and the moment [will lead] to actual regime change.” More likely, we’ll instead see global “convergence-in-decadence.”

What, then, are the alternatives? Well, there’s unexpected catastrophe, exacerbated by modern technologies. Douthat sets this to the side as unforeseeable, and I don’t think the Chinese coronavirus is such a catastrophe, although it highlights the possibility of such. There’s economic collapse, leading to a real resurgence of 1930s-style political chaos. There’s global warming making large sections of the globe uninhabitable. And there’s chaos resulting from all of these together, most of all the unchecked migration of those from the Third World into the rest of the world, leading to Europe becoming “neo-medieval” in order to resist this invasion, while America might resemble late Rome. All this is rather a hodgepodge, though not inaccurate as far as it goes. Out of the listed problems, of course, you could construct many possible futures. We can generally, agree, though, that most of those futures are bad. I’m not sure they’re necessarily as bad as Douthat thinks—I could

construct a future reached after widespread violence, in which the power of the Left, always fragile because based on unreality, is broken, and a competent, clean, outward-looking new society fashioned from the skeleton of the old. In fact, “neo-medieval” sounds pretty good to me. Maybe we should give that a try, not reject it out of hand.

Douthat, too, desires renaissance, the topic of his last chapter. Correctly, Douthat sees little possibility for internal renaissance in the West, without total or near-total collapse first. He does offer an intriguing idea, one I have touched on myself in the past—perhaps a new synthesis of Africa and Europe might lead to a new vibrant culture. I’d like to think this is possible, but little suggests it is. Robert Cardinal Sarah, Douthat’s exemplar, is mostly a product of European culture, not African culture. No culture of world importance has ever come out of Africa, except perhaps Egypt, and that was four thousand years ago. But maybe that will change; no doubt even introspective Romans did not think it likely that illiterate, uncouth Franks in the dark forests of Gaul would create the greatest civilization the world has ever known.

Other than this, Douthat rejects that science alone will lead to a renaissance, even in the unlikely possibility that unprecedented scientific breakthroughs begin again. There is not going to be a Singularity, although it is possible that, say, Chinese scientists may create superhumans by genetic engineering and unleash the Eugenics Wars of *Star Trek*’s imagining. He also rejects the modest post-liberal vision of authors such as Patrick Deneen, correctly recognizing that localism and subsidiarity, if effective in remaking parts of the world, will not be tolerated by their enemies, although he fails to correctly identify that their enemies are our current masters, the Left, and a Right post-liberal government, of unlimited means and limited ends, would likely coexist just fine with such communities, of the Benedict Option type or any other. Douthat seems unable to contemplate such a realist-based, rightist post-liberal government; his limited vision only allows him to consider a nationalist-type state on the model of Israel, not one that wholly rejects the Enlightenment, which, after all, is the root of the decadence the Left has imposed on us over the past sixty years. He briefly analyzes a religious revival, but, as with catastrophe, drops it as impossible to predict. And, ultimately, he concludes, rather unsatisfyingly but with some truth, that any renaissance will depend on “a lot of things happening

at once”—though, as I do, he comes back again and again to Space as a backbone of any such renaissance. “I suspect that a truly globalized civilization cannot help tending toward decadence so long as it remains earthbound, so long as there is no hope of finding actual new worlds to leap toward, conquer, or explore.”

Let’s try something different. Let’s imagine another twentieth century, at the end of which did not lie today’s decadence, which, contra Douthat, was not in the least inevitable. Alternative history is both fascinating and largely pointless, but what if the West had, a hundred years after the French Revolution, somehow wholly rejected the pernicious Enlightenment vision of destructive ever-greater emancipation? What if the Enlightenment had never reached its logical end, woke so-called liberal democracy that is really a dying quasi-totalitarianism? We might have lasted longer, and accomplished more. We might have been Venice writ large, expanding already beyond the Earth, firmly grounded in reality, not ideology, and lifting ourselves upward and outward.

That’s not what happened. And we can’t go back. But maybe we can go forward, not simply by magically refocusing on common outward-facing goals, as Douthat would have it, though that is surely needed, but by first cutting out and cauterizing the cancers at the heart of our civilization. The coronavirus has made most of the many asleep realize, at least a little bit, how badly off track we are, by slapping all of us in the face with reality. Any recognition of reality undermines the power of the Left’s pernicious vision, which relies on a combination of iron exercise of power and the casting of a mass delusion. A little more reality, hard reality, and those who hold the levers of power are likely to be thrown down. We can hope. And if so, the key is to rebuild on the foundations that made us successful earlier, not the destructive combination of the visions of John Stuart Mill and Maximilien Robespierre that has led us to where we are now. Through the fire, probably, but then onward to new lands.