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## Why we fell: Declinist writing and theories of imperial failure in the *longue durée*



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### ABSTRACT

Great powers in transition produce intellectuals who explain that transition as decline. Our goal in this article is to compare how writers in ancient Rome and the contemporary United States understood the trajectories of their societies, and to account for why some of those authors saw decline as inevitable while others proposed policies to reverse the problems they diagnosed. In so doing, we trace the development of a key idea about society through the *longue durée*. We do not seek to determine whether each author's analysis is 'correct.' Rather, we want to explain how authors in each era constructed their arguments and to whom they directed their writings, and understand how modes of analysis and exposition have changed over the millennia. We find that ancient authors generally saw decline as inevitable and stemming primarily from moral causes. Modern authors can be divided into two groups. One sees decline stemming from a mix of moral and structural causes, and as potentially reversible. The other analyzes decline in structural terms and presents it as irreversible. Our findings have implications for sociological work on how ideas are constructed through time, and how social scientists grappling with macro-level change build on enduring ontologies.

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## 1. Introduction

How do intellectuals who believe they are living through an era of decline write about and analyze that experience? A growing number of American as well as foreign authors describe the United States as a nation in decline and seek to explain, and offer suggestions for reversing, that trajectory. The United States is not the first great power to be perceived as being in decline, nor is it the first nation whose intellectuals have grappled with their society's fading fortunes. In this article, we do not offer our own view on whether or why the U.S. is in decline. Rather, we seek to identify the range of themes, rhetorical styles and logics of explanation in a subset of texts on American decline, and then compare them with ancient Romans who wrote about their empire's centuries-long decline. Since our concern is with authors who thought they were experiencing and wrote about the contemporaneous decline of their society, we do not address what Americans have to say about ancient Rome except in so far as they draw on Rome and other historical cases to support theories about or draw lessons for the contemporary United States.

Why did we select ancient Rome rather than more recent sites of decline (contemporary Japan, nineteenth century Britain or France, seventeenth century Holland) for comparison with the U.S.? Our decision was guided by three factors. First, by comparing the first great empire to both undergo decline and generate a literature of decline with the most recent example, we seek to identify the themes that have endured across the broadest range of temporal and structural forms. In other words, where we can find similarities in the themes employed by both ancient Romans and contemporary Americans to address decline, we can conclude that those approaches are intrinsic to analyses of decline. Second, by identifying how contemporary theories of decline differ from their ancient antecedents, we can see what modern and especially academic modes of analysis have added to thought about decline and large-scale social change, and which themes have been lost to intellectual debate in the intervening millennia. Finally, our comparison allows us to highlight the particular conceptions that ancient and contemporary intellectuals hold of their purposes in writing about decline, above all their intended audiences and impact.

Theories of decline matter, and are worthy of comparative historical analysis, because their creators seek to intervene in the intellectual, political and moral life of their society. The ways in which ancient Roman and contemporary American thinkers frame their analyses speak to their societies' understandings of human agency and structural forces. The authors made political interventions through their stances on whether decline was inevitable, and therefore a process to be studied, explained, and perhaps mourned, or something that could be reversed through strategic reforms or a revival of their fellow citizens' moral strength.

The critical study of decline theories is inherently comparative. Contemporary authors who assert the inevitability of American decline base their arguments on perceived similarities between the causal forces that affect the U.S. today and those that supposedly brought down previous dominant powers. Authors who believe decline can be reversed look to the inhabitants of extinct empires to draw exemplary or cautionary lessons for today's Americans. By contrast, Roman historians generally believed that their empire was unprecedented both in its glory and in its decline. As a result, they saw themselves as engaged in a new intellectual task: chronicling and explicating the unique forces that were ruining the Roman world as they idealized it. Although civilizations collapsed prior to Rome, Roman historiographers gave us the earliest known texts to grapple with the causes and consequences of decline. Sixth and fifth century BC Greek authors generally rued the loss of morals in their contemporaries but did not construct comprehensive analyses of their city-states' decline (with the possible exception of Aristotle, who analyzed Sparta's decline mainly through her politics (Cawkwell, 1983); however, as an Athenian he was an outside observer of Spartan affairs).

A core conceptual intervention into the existing scholarship is our argument that theories of decline are embedded in a distinct literature characterized by stylistic modes and intellectual commitments that have a long (indeed, an ancient) genealogy. We call this *declinist writing* and consider it a key category of social narrative. Social narratives—whether focused on individuals, groups, or institutions—are powerful shapers of policy and social identity (Somers and Block, 2005;

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