

CHARLES UNIVERSITY

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Master's Thesis

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Western Declinism and the Crisis of the Elites

Západní deklinismus a krize elit

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is my own unaided work. All sources used are acknowledged as cited works. This thesis was not previously presented to another examination board and has not been published anywhere else.

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Hugo Chadima

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the concept of Western declinism and examines the role of elite crisis within declinist processes. Drawing from the work of Oswald Spengler, it also explores spiritual, institutional, and territorial dimensions of decline as theorized by major scholars including Arnold Toynbee, Carroll Quigley, James Burnham, and Samuel Huntington. The thesis connects these forms of decline to the crisis of the elites, applying sociological frameworks of Peter Turchin, José Ortega y Gasset, and Christopher Lasch. By analyzing elite overproduction, revolt phenomena, and the breakdown of traditional hierarchies, it explores how the behavior of modern elites not only reflects but also exacerbates social instability. The study traces historical cycles, situating contemporary declinist symptoms in the West within broader patterns of societal and civilizational development. Ultimately, it argues that Western decline is subject to demographic factors that reshape elite structures, resulting in a lack of their accountability. The thesis concludes that elite crisis research could be helpful in mitigating further civilizational decline.

Název práce

Západní deklinismus a krize elit

Klíčová slova

Deklinismus, Západní civilizace, krize elit, sociální cyklus

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá koncept západního deklinismu a roli krize elit v deklinistických procesech. Vychází z díla Oswalda Spenglera a také zkoumá duchovní, institucionální a teritoriální dimenze úpadku, jak je popisují významní učenci jako Arnold Toynbee, Carroll Quigley, James Burnham a Samuel Huntington. Práce propojuje tyto projevy úpadku s krizí elit a aplikuje je v rámci sociologických soustav Petera Turchina, José Ortegy y Gasset a Christophera Lasche. Skrze analýzu nadprodukce elit, fenoménu revolty a rozpadu tradičních hierarchií zkoumá, jak chování moderních elit nejen reflektuje, ale také narušuje sociální stabilitu. Studie sleduje historické cykly a zasazuje současné deklinistické symptomy na Západě do širších vzorců společenského a civilizačního vývoje. Práce v konečném důsledku tvrdí, že západní úpadek je podmíněn demografickými faktory, které přetvářejí elitní struktury, což vede k nedostatku jejich odpovědnosti. Práce dochází k závěru, že výzkum krize elit by mohl být užitečný při dalším zmírňování civilizačního úpadku.

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Introduction

Civilizational anxiety in the West has reached an all-time peak. According to Google Books Ngram Viewer, the use of the term “declinism” in global literature has increased by a factor of 200 since 1980.¹ A slew of works have been published regarding this topic, all lamenting different manifestations of the same phenomenon. In the Czech Republic for example, archaeologist Miroslav Bárta has become the foremost voice of declinism in public discourse. According to him, the world is becoming more unstable and unpredictable. Market volatility, climate change, migrations, and military conflicts are all destabilizing factors that challenge our civilization and threaten its collapse.² He argues that the world appeared stable until these crises began to accumulate rapidly. This makes the study of civilizational collapse relevant once again.³

Bárta is only an example of a wider Western trend. Famous British author Niall Ferguson writes in his book “Civilization: The West and the Rest” that fear of collapse has become better grounded over the years. The idea that we are all doomed and bound to degenerate is something we feel as individuals due to our own mortality. There seems to be a sense of mortal inevitability together with uncertainty. Will it result in gradual stagnation or a cataclysmic event that disrupts our civilization?⁴ The idea of Western decline is not a new one, but the increasing academic interest in the topic is likely a result of a greater societal pessimism. Data from public surveys seem to indicate as much. In America and Europe, we see decreasing levels of satisfaction and a general feeling that things will only get worse in the future.^{5 6}

Why is this happening? Part of the answer might be the fact that the West enjoys an unprecedented level of prosperity. It has accumulated such a degree of wealth that fearing its loss is natural. It could also be a result of self-reflection, where Westerners realize that this prosperity came at the cost of natural degradation and exploitation. Another explanation is that the increased living standards made Westerners lose resilience and moral foundations. This variety of economic and ethical concerns has also translated into the political arena. The electoral shakeups, rise of polarizing politicians, and general feeling of chaos further exacerbate Western fear of the future.

¹ Google Books, accessed 2025

² Bárta 2019, 19

³ Ibid., 20

⁴ Ferguson 2011, 204

⁵ Higgins, Ahrendt, 2025

⁶ Daniller, 2023

This is why civilizational research has been gaining greater importance. Within the hectic cycle of current events, we often lose perspective. Civilizations came and went before us, with some lasting way longer than ours, despite major turbulences. Tracking what makes civilizations resilient was always an important topic; only now do we realize how much so. This is why the goal of this thesis will be to approach the topic of Western decline with an open mind. Instead of trying to dismiss or debunk the topic, we will analyze academic discourse on the topic throughout the past century. Instead of arriving at a prognosis, which is beyond our ambition, we will first try to identify what can even be considered a declinist symptom and then try to identify a prominent cause.

The West is, like all civilizations, governed by an elite. Who constitutes the elite is a topic for our research, but the important fact remains that the elite, for all the advantages that it enjoys, always bears political responsibility. If the West really is in a state of decline, it automatically befalls the most powerful and privileged to initiate a corrective process. This is why in this thesis we pose two research questions: “What constitutes the process of civilizational decline?” and “To what extent are declinist symptoms in the West caused by a crisis of the elites?” Our research will first require an in-depth analysis of declinism as a scholarly discipline. We will examine perspectives on decline from several authors who focus on understanding civilizational trends throughout history. Then we will focus on scholars studying societal crises and identify what constitutes an elite crisis. At the end, we will trace common findings from both scholarly disciplines and apply them to answer our research questions.

Part 1: Western Declinism

The notion of Western civilizational decline made its first significant appearance in 1918 with the publication of the first volume of *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler. To this day the work garners much attention as the debate around the question of Western decline intensifies. Declinism is defined as a belief that something, in our case Western civilization, is getting worse, i.e., is in a state of decline. This, of course, opens several questions. How can we determine what even is Western, and by what metric is it supposedly deteriorating?

1.1 Understanding declinist theory

Here, we will focus on the two volumes of Spengler's magnum opus with the goal of understanding the declinist position. The summary of Spengler will be further complemented using the findings of other prominent authors in the field of civilizational research, namely Arnold Toynbee, Carroll Quigley, James Burnham, and Samuel Huntington. This is to broaden the scope of our research and integrate different theories of civilizational development into Western declinist thought. Spengler will be a point of reference throughout the thesis due to his outsized influence, with perspectives of other scholars serving as points of comparison in order to help contextualize his work within broader academic discourse.

1.1.1 Why civilizations come and go

Civilizations are finite and subject to natural degradation. This theory is by no means a new one or limited to civilizations but serves as a foundation for Western declinist discourse. Civilization is understood as the historical process of culture overcoming its locality, striving to grow and become global.⁷ He defines civilization as the "inevitable destiny of culture," an artificial state of humanity resulting from human activity.⁸ Civilizations are accumulations of culture that become finite and subject to natural degradation. Spengler writes that decline is an essential fact of reality, in the same way that "to birth belongs death." It is impossible to defy historical experience, despite our misinformed hopes for what can, rather than will, happen.⁹

⁷ Spengler 1926, 32

⁸ Ibid., 31

⁹ Ibid., 40

Spengler justifies his fatalistic prognosis using an unorthodox view of history as a geometrically structured image.¹⁰ Humanity is understood as an evolving organism, meaning the culture it manifests is also a living fact, rather than just a collection of impersonal ideas. He calls this the “Morphology of World History.”¹¹ Spengler prefers an intuitive approach over a cognitive one, since we are not looking at a static image of what culture is in a single moment but also at its potentiality. Fulfillment of the soul, its organic becoming, produces history, which we study using morphology through symbols and portraits.¹² Each culture is only a self-actualizing form of a single soul, with an organic logic of existence that he calls “destiny.”¹³

Spengler identifies cultures through shapes, patterns, and other pure forms, rather than their histories. It is a physiognomic study of timeless phenomena manifested across different periods and cognized by humans through symbolism.¹⁴ Prime symbols are a possibility that arises in cultures, allowing them to comprehend the extension of their substance into the world. It marks the awakening of culture into self-consciousness that at the same time seals its fate, since it contains within it the moment of its finality.¹⁵ He likes using colorful metaphors, comparing the rise and fall of cultures to majestic wave cycles and their growth into civilization to a giant forest branching towards the sky.¹⁶ Spengler wants to incorporate the validity of all world cultures when applying this organic logic in his analysis. Instead of trying to fit cultures into a prefabricated scheme, he wants to perceive their natural unfolding.¹⁷

All cultural movements have an invisible form; they are living streams of people that cannot be sorted systematically but can only be felt as self-evident reality.¹⁸ Society emerges through inner connection between people. Intra-social relations form an unconscious mental picture called the “customary ethic,” which then takes on a conscious form of “law.”¹⁹ Spengler also characterizes the “people” as a unit of the soul. Having the same language, homeland, or physical features doesn’t distinguish a people from a population, but a sense of collective “we” does.²⁰ He even views races as spiritual units with special modes of conscious and subconscious communication that include all

¹⁰ Spengler 1926, 5

¹¹ Ibid., 100

¹² Ibid., 102

¹³ Ibid., 129

¹⁴ Ibid., 104

¹⁵ Ibid., 180

¹⁶ Ibid., 106

¹⁷ Ibid., 25

¹⁸ Spengler 1928, 361

¹⁹ Ibid., 363

²⁰ Ibid., 165

intelligible expression.²¹ Racial consciousness is instinctually present in rhythm, tempo, melody, colors, gestures, and taboos.²²

1.1.2 Anatomy of the Decline

Now that we know why Spengler considers all civilizations to be finite, we can examine the exact process of their demise. Before developing into a mature civilization, humans experience the age of primitive culture, which can currently be found only in sub-Saharan Africa. He doesn't use the term "primitive" in a derogatory way, rather describing primitive cultures as being "vital and effectual."²³ Since the primitive man is dealing with a harsh environment, the formation of his myths, customs, and techniques is immediate. His cultural expressions lack intellectual depth because they are a product of a dynamic struggle for survival.²⁴

The first deep transformation of the primal man is agriculture, where instead of being at the mercy of a hostile natural environment, he learns to alter it to his advantage²⁵ This rural world-feeling is manifest in an association of the earth with motherhood. The symbolic act of sowing and reaping creates a familiar association with the land. Blood is bound to soil, and the individual lays his roots, becoming plantlike. The town is just another manifestation of the same form. It too offers a habitat that its resident regards as natural.²⁶ Spengler thinks that while villages and towns still have souls, the city doesn't. It doesn't have the same attachment to locality or an inward spiritual subtext but is instead an outward reflection separated from land or locality. The city transforms man into a free consciousness operating on cold intellect and uproots him in the process.²⁷

While the country is timeless and self-sufficient, the city is inherently dependent on the country for its people and resources; every city is therefore destined to die.²⁸ Throughout world history, the city has bankrupted the country due to its gradual detachment from it. The capital city is expansive and disenfranchises the land.²⁹ Urban intellect, which prescribes political and religious form, assumes ever larger control over economic affairs. It creates an abstract money market that trades fictitious commodities by separating

²¹ Spengler 1928, 114

²² Ibid., 117

²³ Ibid., 34

²⁴ Ibid., 35

²⁵ Ibid., 89

²⁶ Ibid., 90

²⁷ Ibid., 92

²⁸ Ibid., 102

²⁹ Ibid., 95

currency from goods.³⁰ This phenomenon brews into elitism, where the urbanite class starts detesting the traditional estates like peasantry, gentry, and priesthood. The artificial attempts to displace the organic.³¹

This marks the coming of the “last man,” a sterile urbanite who takes a metaphysical turn towards death.³² The “cosmopolis” embraces artificiality, further uprooting the fabric of culture and using it up. Creative freedom present in a thriving culture comes with a fatal disposition, as it starts to deny the natural order of the organic world. Living stops being self-evident but becomes a subject of skepticism, judged by artificial utilitarian and rational criteria.³³ As life starts having to be justified, instinctive will for survival is abandoned. Birthrates decrease and even become regulated through infanticide.³⁴ Civilization enters a final stage of depopulation, which lasts for centuries. It starts crumbling from the summit, starting with the cities and finally to the land itself, with only the most primitive blood remaining.³⁵

1.1.3 The Faustian culture

Having examined Spengler’s idea of the decline, we can review his main proposition of the West’s decline. Like all other civilizations, the West too is a destiny-bound culture that advances towards an inevitable demise. However, the path that it takes in fulfilling the potentiality of its soul sets it apart. The West is constituted by its daring approach to numbers, which seeks to transcend towards the infinite. Referencing Goethe’s famous play, he calls this a “Faustian” mathematic. While the essence of the Classical³⁶ mathematics concentrated on setting limits and organizing divisions, the Faustian seeks to open a way to the infinite.³⁷ It has, according to Spengler, gone beyond elementary limitations and dissolved concrete forms into abstract ones.³⁸

The Faustian spirit awakened in the early primitive Nordic races, which emancipated themselves through seafaring and opened access to the seemingly limitless space of the ocean. Unlike more telluric cultures, Westerners gained a unique sense of liberty that

³⁰ Spengler 1928, 97

³¹ Spengler 1926, 354

³² Spengler 1928, 103

³³ Spengler 1926, 353

³⁴ Spengler 1928, 104

³⁵ Ibid., 105

³⁶ By “Classical” Spengler means Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.

³⁷ Spengler 1926, 86

³⁸ Ibid., 87

encouraged exploration and later subjugation of the world.³⁹ The Faustian passion to master all dimensions thrust itself upon nature, stubbornly seeking to discover at all costs. It meant the expansion of conquest over earth's entire surface, including the polar regions and tallest mountain peaks, as well as towards mastering the air with flight.⁴⁰ The Western "world-feeling" has produced the idea of limitless space—the universe, with infinite systems of stars and galaxies.⁴¹ Informed by Christian chronology, the Faustian view of history crafts a universal world destiny, despite its inherent cultural subjectivity. Its craving for infinity has, for the first time in human existence, identified the age of man as a mere episode of world history.⁴² In the same vein, the Faustian culture located our Earth and solar system as a fraction of the vast universe.⁴³

The Faustian soul desires to will freely, to transcend even its own ego and unbind the will from its own particularity. This explains the deep Faustian longing for mysticism.⁴⁴ Within Gothic Christian tradition, the ritual of transubstantiation itself represents a freely chosen sacrifice. The ego is emancipated to choose conscious duty and be responsible to itself.⁴⁵ The personal is given exceptional importance through the sacraments of baptism and confession, which allow the individual to choose faith and then reaffirm it through self-reflection.⁴⁶ The quest for infinity extends into its idea of immortality, rooted in the sacrificial death of Jesus and his resurrection. The Faustian soul possesses both a concern with death and the possibility of overcoming it.⁴⁷ Ever since the Gothic period, Faustian man has been trying to find out God's secrets, whether through intense piety or, later, through science. He creates machines as his own man-made cosmos, wanting to be like God.⁴⁸

1.1.4 Why the West will fall

According to Spengler, the peak of European colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries was the zenith of Western civilization, with its culture ripening to its limits with the technological and artistic flourishing of the period.⁴⁹ He even calls imperialism the

³⁹ Spengler 1926, 333

⁴⁰ Spengler 1928, 501

⁴¹ Spengler 1926, 172

⁴² Spengler 1928, 28

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 292

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 293

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 294

⁴⁷ Spengler 1926, 167

⁴⁸ Spengler 1928, 502

⁴⁹ Spengler 1926, 39

“purest form of civilization.”⁵⁰ By this logic, the period following World War One, during which *The Decline of the West* was written, marks the beginning of the end. Like all prior civilizations, the West will also succumb to cosmopolitan parasitism and the takeover of urban intellect over the economy. At the peak of many civilizations are its great cities, where an orgy of unbridled thought runs rampant, as is now happening in the West.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the earth is being sacrificed to the insatiable Faustian desire as the advancement of mechanized economic life exhausts nature.⁵²

Spengler warns that mechanization of daily life also has an excessive influence on shaping the mind of Faustian men, who become enslaved to their own creation as a result. Both the worker and the owner became subservient to the machine, which now acts as their manager and organizer.⁵³ Their motivations are also directed by the economic machine of wages and profits. The Faustian conception of money allowed for the emergence of capitalism, where money generates money without even having to be minted.⁵⁴ However, like all products of intellect, this regime is a finite one. The eternal fact of blood will be decisive in overthrowing the thought of money from the seat of power and reclaiming it for conscious life. In the end, historical necessity is always achieved, regardless of the individual’s participation.⁵⁵

While this would seem like a partial acceptance of Marxist historical materialism, Spengler adds a pessimistic twist. Socialism is a symptom of nihilism, which represents the Faustian mode of spiritual extinction. It fails to recognize the soul and reduces man to matter.⁵⁶ He doesn’t consider socialism as an economic movement, rather seeing it as a manifestation of a religious sentiment deprived of its spiritual content. Spengler characterizes it as “Faustian world-feeling become irreligious.”⁵⁷ While proponents of socialism regard it as the form of the future, opponents argue it leads to downfall. Spengler agrees with both views. The Faustian conception of progress is essentially socialistic, representing the directional movement of life towards its destiny.⁵⁸ Socialism marks an exhaustion of possibilities of the once emancipated Northern race, as there is nothing more to explore and the inner possibilities of the Faustian soul are depleted.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Spengler 1926, 37

⁵¹ Spengler 1928, 500

⁵² Ibid., 505

⁵³ Ibid., 504

⁵⁴ Ibid., 492

⁵⁵ Ibid., 507

⁵⁶ Spengler 1926, 356

⁵⁷ Ibid., 359

⁵⁸ Ibid., 361

⁵⁹ Ibid., 363

The Western-Faustian culture is in a unique situation where it attempts to discover its preordained evolution. It cannot choose its path but might be able to identify the one chosen by destiny. Through morphology of the becoming soul, Spengler claims that he is finalizing the “last great task” of Western philosophy before its inevitable decline.⁶⁰ However, Spengler also warns that our comprehension of destiny may be misconstrued, as it is wholly beyond the reach of critical thought. The very attempt to find causalities, critically approach and analyze fate based on prior knowledge, is self-defeating. Whatever it is that moves the present moment may only be lived and felt at a deep intuitive level.⁶¹ The unfolding of destiny is incidental, and every epoch offers an abundance of unforeseen events that form our living unity.⁶²

1.2 Comparing theories of decline

Spengler’s work has inspired a great many other scholars focused on civilizational research, some of whom will be examined here. Unlike Spengler, however, their view of a decline is not fatalistic. Rather than posing an abstract form of destiny-bound culture that simply withers away from exhaustion of possibilities, these academics offer more concrete theoretical frameworks that directly focus on cause and effect. In this chapter, we will explore the other theories of Western culture’s recession. Overall, there are four selected authors who identify three different phenomena that they consider to be the prime symptom of a civilizational decline. Our aim will be to compare each one with symptoms identified by Spengler, finding potential overlap.

1.2.1 Spiritual decline

For the purposes of our research, we will examine Arnold Toynbee’s collection of essays titled *Civilization on Trial*. Despite being published in 1948, some essays date as long as twenty years back and offer a comprehensive profile of the author’s outlook on the topic at hand. Toynbee builds on the work of Oswald Spengler, which he considers illuminating but also unnecessarily dogmatic and deterministic. He rejects the notion that examining dead civilizations allows us to make prognoses about a living one. We can see patterns through empirical comparative studies, but this is a far cry from a uniform automatism.⁶³

⁶⁰ Spengler 1926, 159

⁶¹ Ibid., 139

⁶² Ibid., 145

⁶³ Toynbee 1948, 12

Toynbee sees civilization as a universal phenomenon; he ties social progress to spiritual progress.⁶⁴ While civilizations come and go, the “big C” civilization prevails and reincarnates. The destruction of war and the oppression of class ravage civilization regardless of technological advancement, since human propensity to sin remains unchanged.⁶⁵ The movement of civilizations seems to follow a cycle of birth and death, while the trajectory of religion seems to be continuously linear and ascendant. Civilizations serve as steppingstones for religions, feeding them new revelations and insights. We then see backsliding of this spiritual progress with idolatry.⁶⁶ It generally follows a pattern that higher religions lay groundwork for civilizations, which then become secular, disintegrate, and create space for religion to reemerge.⁶⁷

Toynbee’s universalist view of civilization contradicts the conception of a distinct Faustian one, but it also represents a very Faustian idea at its core. In his view, the Western enterprise is to expand the horizons of civilization and unite the world “under one roof.” We might be inclined by our Western bias to view ourselves as exceptional, but the level of progress we have seen since the year 1500 is truly unprecedented.⁶⁸ The ocean became for Western explorers what the steppe was for Eastern nomads. The sailing ship allowed for an interconnected global society and tied foreign continents to Europe.⁶⁹ The West is on a path to transcend its own history, and past histories of civilizations are thereby merging into a unified global canon. Toynbee considers this global unifying process a great service to humanity as part of divine providence.⁷⁰

He sees the advancement of materialism and the resulting spiritual void as equivalent to civilizational decline. It is the “Leviathan worship” that Toynbee sees as the root of desolation, substituting the divine as an object of reverence for the human. Yet humans cannot thrive unless their potential for spiritual self-realization is maximized.⁷¹ The void left by Western materialism has often been filled by primarily Islamic resurgence, pitting this “cosmopolitan proletariat” against the colonizers.⁷² The resulting social disintegration means a proletarian revolt, with the dominant minority losing its grip on power. Both groups create their own universal frameworks, with the powerful having the

⁶⁴ Toynbee 1948, 247

⁶⁵ Ibid., 24

⁶⁶ Ibid., 236

⁶⁷ Ibid., 234

⁶⁸ Ibid., 65

⁶⁹ Ibid., 70

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90

⁷¹ Ibid., 256

⁷² Ibid., 208

“state” and the proletariat creating a “church.” Inevitably, the state fails, and the church endures, forming a basis for a new, post-collapse civilization.⁷³

Fundamentally, Toynbee is convinced that Christianity does, unlike any other religion, offer the best conditions for spiritual illumination. It conveys a unique sense of grace, as a soul can win salvation from a God that created it in his own image.⁷⁴ The church has, by virtue of its effective organization, managed to accumulate, preserve, and communicate divine revelation, which is built on the wisdom of many higher religions preceding it. This offers each successive generation of Christians a greater spiritual opportunity to prepare for the afterlife.⁷⁵ He considers the institutions adopted by Christianity, from their hierarchy to holy rites and rituals, to be the most enduring of all religions. This is supposedly due to their continuity with pre-Christian religious practices and their ability to outlast all secular institutions.⁷⁶ He expects Christianity to endure the eventual breakdown of the now-secularized Western civilization, like when it outlasted the fall of the Roman Empire.⁷⁷

1.2.2 Institutional decline

The work of Spengler and Toynbee has served as inspiration for many academics to expand on their civilizational research and come up with their own theories of decline. Among them features Carroll Quigley, a prominent American historian who in 1961 published his *The Evolution of Civilizations*. He engages with the popularized Darwinian notion of civilization as a biological entity with a natural life cycle. Spengler, among other declinists, sees a direct parallel between lack of strife and loss of vitality. Once strong and vigorous societies become weakened by material comfort resulting from their prior success, they are supposed to start decaying. However, Quigley points out that a real explanation for this loss of motion is lacking here.⁷⁸

Quigley sets out to find the root cause that would explain the decline in civilizational dynamism. Like Spengler, he also sees two stages of human development, calling them “parasitic and producing.” A parasitic society survives by mere hunting or gathering; its economic activity means a decrease of total wealth in the world. On the other hand, productive society is such that it increases total wealth, like through agriculture and

⁷³ Toynbee 1948, 13

⁷⁴ Ibid., 251

⁷⁵ Ibid., 249

⁷⁶ Ibid., 242

⁷⁷ Ibid., 239

⁷⁸ Quigley 1979, 130

pasture.⁷⁹ Every civilization forms an instrument of expansion, which organizes in such a way as to incentivize innovation, leading to higher production and subsequent accumulation of surplus, which it then utilizes for further expansion. These steps may be summarized as “invention, saving, and investment.”⁸⁰

For Quigley, decline is synonymous with the breakdown of this value-generating mechanism. In complex civilizations that emerge largely thanks to successful expansion in productivity, this breakdown happens internally through the process of institutionalization. The human need for group security, the need to divide power and wealth, and the need for understanding and relationships all necessitate the formation of social organizations, which become institutions. These serve as means for survival but then become ends in themselves.⁸¹ The original task at hand becomes secondary to maintaining order and authority. They become instruments for opportunists to advance over others, sidelining their main purpose in the process.⁸²

Institutionalization of an instrument of expansion usually takes on a form of decreasing the rate of investment, and this in turn leads to a crisis.⁸³ This can be seen in the institutionalization of armies, for example. Innovation that would uproot existing organizational structures and hinder career prospects of their incumbents often gets suppressed, at the cost of military defeats and the lives of soldiers. This is why new armies that haven't yet become institutionalized often win over old, established ones.⁸⁴ The process of institutionalization can be traced in all social phenomena, from factories, unions, and churches to education, arts, and sports. Their ineffectiveness either results in difficult reforms or complete circumvention of the institution. Once this happens, a new instrument is formed, which then becomes institutionalized, losing effectiveness and repeating the whole process. Such is the pulse of historical development.⁸⁵

Quigley creates his own grand theory of the civilizational cycle, dividing history into seven stages: Mixture, Gestation, Expansion, Age of Conflict, Universal Empire, Decay, and Invasion.⁸⁶ The age of conflict is a direct result of institutionalization, where those who control the surpluses are pitted against everyone else due to their fear of social change.⁸⁷ This is then followed by universal empire, when a single victor who eliminates all possible

⁷⁹ Quigley 1979, 76

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 132

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 101

⁸² *Ibid.*, 102

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 144

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 109

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 118

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 146

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 151

challengers comes out on top. Prosperity arises as the empire abolishes barriers to trade. However, not much real expansion occurs, as surplus is once again diverted from investment into wasteful and self-indulgent expenditures. This is then followed by a stage of decay, where the vested interests start fighting each other while the public becomes more illiterate and disloyal to the state.⁸⁸ Finally, civilization becomes demoralized and no longer willing to defend itself, which opens a door of opportunity for invaders, initiating a period of mixture, repeating the cycle.⁸⁹

Historical analysis of Western civilization is made difficult by the fact that it has not yet concluded, but also because its stages do not follow a straightforward seven-stage pattern. It has seen three successive movements of expansion, circumvented multiple crises, and destroyed several other civilizations in the process.⁹⁰ In the West, we saw three periods of expansion. First, during feudalism, which became institutionalized into chivalry and then got circumvented by commercial capitalism. That then became institutionalized into mercantilism, which saw reform into industrial capitalism. Now, we're seeing a crisis due to the institution of monopoly capitalism.⁹¹ However, seeing that the West has a habit of breaking the historical pattern, Quigley makes no fatalistic prognosis of a looming demise, setting himself apart from both Spengler and Toynbee.

1.2.3 Territorial decline

As the debate on civilizational decline continued to develop throughout the 20th century, it took on a more practical form. Spengler's metaphysical conception has laid the foundation for a less abstract one, thoroughly grounded in the facts of politics and ideologies of the day. Such scholars concern themselves not only with the decline of internal order and values but also with its increasing vulnerability in the face of external threats. In 1964, this perspective was presented by prominent political theorist James Burnham in his *Suicide of the West*. However, the work is strongly influenced by the Cold War ideological framework. The more well-known and more relevant analysis for our contemporary context is Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, published in 1996. Both works will be useful in our effort to characterize the position of political realists within civilizational discourse.

Burnham takes a critical view of Spengler and his use of the word "decline." To him, the word seems to suggest a value judgement that might be plausible yet largely subjective.

⁸⁸ Quigley 1979, 159

⁸⁹ Ibid., 160

⁹⁰ Ibid., 334

⁹¹ Ibid., 145

He instead emphasizes focus on the “self-evident,” i.e., the irrefutable civilizational contraction, manifested by the collapse of the Western overseas empire.⁹² He looks at maps of different civilizations, the cycles of expansion and later fragmentation of different kingdoms and empires throughout history, and compares them to the ongoing territorial contraction of Western colonial powers. Simply put, Western sovereign domain has passed its pre-World War One zenith.⁹³

This deterioration of power is a unique phenomenon, as it wasn’t caused by any lack of resources or industry. There was virtually no external threat that could challenge the West, meaning the causes of the decline must be internal. Burnham argues that Western powers literally “lost their will to survive,” hence he uses the term “suicide.”⁹⁴ Going one step further, he points to liberalism as the ideology of civilizational suicide. Rather than its direct cause, mainstream liberalism serves as a justification for the withdrawal of Western power and reconciles its population with the loss of their preeminence.⁹⁵ Crucially, Burnham highlights that liberalism in America means something quite different from its globally understood definition. Instead of retaining laissez-faire, small-government principles, American liberalism denotes a left-leaning progressivism.⁹⁶

Burnham postulates that the West’s weakened will to survive has something to do with the decay of religion and an excess of material luxury, of which liberalism is a symptom of.⁹⁷ Western civilization, with its liberal psyche, stands morally disarmed in front of any group that it deems as less well-off than themselves.⁹⁸ This seems to harken back to a sense of white man’s burden, where no same moral standards apply to non-Westerners. Liberals have a natural tendency to judge their own more harshly and to readily forgive any misdeeds committed by the unfortunate. While a functioning society needs common rules, liberals reinforce two different moral codes, lending them to malice and subversion.⁹⁹

As a result, this opens room for the spread of Communism, which represents a counter-system completely at odds with the West. It is an embryonic competitor civilization whose spread is contingent on filling power vacuums present within territory abandoned by the West. The expansion of Communism into Europe seals the Western fracture and

⁹² Burnham 1964, 22

⁹³ Ibid., 16

⁹⁴ Ibid., 24

⁹⁵ Ibid., 26

⁹⁶ Ibid., 34

⁹⁷ Ibid., 301

⁹⁸ Ibid., 197

⁹⁹ Ibid., 203

an emergence of an entirely non-Western sphere.¹⁰⁰ Liberalism fuels constant negation of incumbent power while offering no replacement structure. It pushes its anti-colonial ideology through the foreign policy of the United States, further debasing the Western world.¹⁰¹ In order to prevent extinction, Westerners must renew their conviction and once again assert their power in the world.¹⁰²

Over thirty years later, Huntington addresses similar themes of civilizational anxiety resulting from contraction of power over the world. The dramatic expansion of European power over the past few centuries relied on the exercise of military force and its technological superiority, resulting in the subordination of other civilizations to the Western dominion. Rather than through superiority of religion or values, the West won by applying organized violence.¹⁰³ The West abandoned direct control in favor of continuing influence within non-Western countries, seeking to create a universal state through a network of treaties and international organizations. With other civilizations still taking control over their own destinies more than before, this trend has been offset. Just by comparing world maps in 1920 and 1990, we can see how successful the revolt against Western power was.¹⁰⁴

Huntington agrees with both Spengler and Toynbee in their critique of the simplified linear view of historical progress. He employs a broader perspective that accounts for the multiplicity of civilizations, rather than solely accepting the Western universalist conception.¹⁰⁵ He further disputes the notion of a universal world civilization, as it is often equated to Western consumerism and pop culture. Reducing Western culture to commercial goods trivializes it while giving us no indication of its real shared values.¹⁰⁶ Modernization, he argues, does not necessarily mean Westernization; other civilizations have their own path to development. On the contrary, successful modernization of other cultures further strengthens them and reduces the power of the West. This means that technological advancement enables non-Western countries to become less Western, not more.¹⁰⁷ We can see this with the subtle displacement of the English language from global circles. This only shows that linguistic dominance is contingent on political and economic dominance of its native states.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Burnham 1964, 18

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 282

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 288

¹⁰³ Huntington 1996, 51

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 53

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 55

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 58

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 78

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 63

Huntington favors the realist theory of international relations. Survival of states relies on enhancing their security through armies or diplomacy. Values and culture also influence decision-making and international norms in general, but the world order is de facto still in anarchy.¹⁰⁹ Huntington also highlights the role of cultural differences in breeding conflict and distrust, while cultural similarities serve as a bond among nations. It is the basic human need to define its own ingroup in relation to the other.¹¹⁰ This means that the decline of the West is relative to its position against other civilizations. Huntington argues that Western civilization is being outcompeted by Asian civilization on an economic and military level. Muslim countries are also outflanking the West due to demographic and cultural factors. Survival will therefore depend on reaffirmation of Western identity, accepting it not as universal but unique, while avoiding a full-scale war with other civilizations.¹¹¹

Therefore, the two scholars offer two different ways of conceptualizing Western territorial decline. While Burnham is concerned for the loss of global power projection, Huntington opposes excessive Western intervention, pointing instead at the encroachment of universalism, which dissolves Western identity. While Burnham views the West as one of the two global ideological blocs competing for dominance, Huntington sees a multipolar world of civilizational blocs whose particularity overrules ideological similarities.

1.2.4 Analyzing declinism

With the input from four selected scholars, we have gained the essential components needed for a comparative analysis of Spengler's theory of decline. On its own, the notion of civilization as an almost biological unit with a determined cosmic destiny is a purely philosophical concept, unbound by physical burden of proof. It is also difficult to apply in research that tries to identify its causes. Now that we know three concrete manifestations of decline—spiritual, institutional, and territorial—the declinist argument gains a depth that goes beyond belief in fatalism and towards a more empirical direction. Let us now examine where these works intersect.

Spengler and Toynbee are both in agreement that spiritual decline means a civilizational one as well. When civilization abandons its spiritual foundations and embraces materialism, it becomes detached from its organic origin and, to that extent, also loses its vitality. However, while Spengler sees religion as a temporal reflection of a culture's soul, Toynbee unambiguously believes in a spiritual ascension of humanity that goes

¹⁰⁹ Huntington 1996, 34

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20

beyond the bounds of any given civilization. To Spengler, Christianity is an evolving manifestation of the Faustian world-feeling, capturing its longing for infinity and, as a result, embracing universalist doctrines, but then displaced by irreligious and nihilistic outlooks in its final stages. Toynbee sees the Christian church as an organization that has and will outlast civilizations and guide individual souls towards salvation instead of a collective cultural one.

Breakdown through institutionalization of productive instruments as described by Quigley also has some crossover with Spengler, namely his view of metropolitan parasitism. The city takes control over material surplus through its money economy and directly absorbs it, leaving the productive countryside in destitution. This leads to an outflow of people from their rural setting into the city, leading to scarcity. However, rather than seeing the following decline from an economic perspective of human development, he sees the urban agglomeration itself as preceding its own ruin. The city literally uses up culture, to the point where it relapses into skepticism and self-negation. The root cause of decline isn't based on a lack of resources but a lack of soul. Quigley also identifies demoralization of citizens as a declinist symptom but attributes it to apathy towards a society where institutionalization denies them a fair share of the surplus.

Finally, Burnham and Huntington also hold only a few similar observations. Spengler would concur with the notion that the West is losing its will to live, which is a core attribute of civilizational decline for him as well as Burnham. Both authors identify a left-wing ideology as a symptom of the defeatist attitude that permeates the West. While Burnham believes that the West can make a choice to reassert itself and reject liberal dogma in the process, Spengler views the embracing of socialism as a natural part of the Faustian idea of progress and thereby another step towards its demise. In Huntington's case, there is not much overlap. Judging the state of decline only by a comparison with other civilizations in the same period is antithetical to Spengler's morphological approach, which looks at civilizations throughout history, finding similar phenomena within their respective life cycles. The two agree only in that no civilization is universal and that their multiplicity must always be accounted for.

1.3 Is decline destiny?

The main cleavage between Spengler and the rest of the authors seems to be the question of destiny. The determinist approach to decline sees civilization from an organistic point of view, as a living stream of beings that manifests in physiological forms. Spengler is a vitalist who sees life as a pulsating force of intuitive will. Ideas and social relations are only the invisible manifestations of a common soul that shapes humanity's direction like

a metaphysical equivalent to genetic code. He doesn't engage with this entity from a rational point of view, instead embracing its mystery, resigning on empirical inquiry. Spengler's two volumes on Western decline are informed by his individual perception of a self-evident reality, philosophically justified by his rejection of reason.

Despite how seemingly inaccessible this makes him for the purpose of empirical research, he is constantly referenced by most civilizational scholars, including all the ones that we examined in our comparative analysis. Their view of civilization remains indeterminate, as they focus their research on the historical events as they were unfolding, trying to minimize the impact of hindsight or bias on their findings. Their findings are practical, offering a tidy overview of decline's root causes and sometimes even potential remedies. This leaves us with a fundamental question: what controls the West's civilizational destiny? It is, of course, impossible to prove that it is a Faustian soul; however, it remains a hypothesis that cannot be dismissed outright either. After all, if all the facts truly point to future decline being etched into culture from its conception, can we really ignore the role of fate?

This leaves us with only one option, which is to identify what stands at the root of the problem. We ask this in order to decipher whether human beings still have agency in declinist processes, rather than being at the mercy of fate. The collective of authors that we reviewed still regards civilization as a human enterprise rather than that of a soul. All three symptoms of decline—the spiritual, institutional, and territorial—are fundamentally traced to actions of people. Toynbee considers the spiritual decline to be the work of sinful human beings; Quigley also attributes the propensity of institutional rot to conscious choice by the vested interests, while Burnham and Huntington think the loss of Western power and territory may be reversed by reassertion of strength in the face of opponents. The key question now is that of accountability. If the West is really in decline, who is to blame?

Part 2: Crisis of the Elites

2.1 Who is in power?

Identifying the culprit responsible for the ills of civilization is no easy task. The failings of large collectives may be attributed to external factors outside of human control, but also to internal issues of societal upheaval. Spengler covers this topic in reference to the takeover of cities over rural habitats and the resulting parasitic relationship, which exhausts the productive countryside of life and resources. However, a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon is needed to understand how this supposed civilization-destroying mechanism develops into a full-blown conflict between powerful groups. To advance our research towards the creation of a functional theory, we must shortly review the declinist stance towards the elite crisis. Despite his fatalistic disposition, Spengler doesn't see this process as a static mechanism and observes how overthrowing those in power distorts the timeline of civilizational degradation.

2.1.1 The Caesarean relapse

Every complex society in history has organized some form of hierarchy. Domestic politics are dominated by class oppositions in the same way that foreign politics are dominated by interstate conflicts.¹¹² In Spengler's view, it is the soil-bound estates of nobility and priesthood standing against the cosmopolitan parties of money and intellect. This also reflects the division between democrats and aristocrats. Simply put, class and cultural differences trump ideological ones.¹¹³ Western states have strong feudal origins that tie their destinies with those of noble families. Their rulers inspire obedience at an intuitive level, surfacing from an organic feeling of collective unity. It is an inherited natural phenomenon, which produces dynasties.¹¹⁴ Dynasties determine political conduct in the Western world and even within republics, since it is such a deep-rooted mode of politics. The republic is a mere negation of monarchy that emerges from fear and mistrust of the sovereign.¹¹⁵ It is tailored to displace the organic, soil-bound life of feudal privileges with ideological notions of rationalism and liberty.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Spengler 1928, 367

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 449

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 377

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 413

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 403

According to Spengler, democracy functions on equating money with political power. This allows for the dominance of another abstract force: the intellect. The rurality-based soul is in direct conflict with the spirit of money and intellect that the cities embody to create circumstances that allow them to mobilize all things from countryside.¹¹⁷ Democracy becomes its own destroyer, since it organizes and produces interests of its possessors, who then wield real power over election outcomes. This oligarchy breeds resentment and disdain from the disenfranchised masses, setting the stage for a return to blood tradition.¹¹⁸ The age of materialism is marked by occasional easing of intellectual tension and a tendency to turn back towards myth. Cults fill the inner void, despite being equally shallow and more dishonest. Spengler claims that this “second religiousness” forms the final political constitution of late civilizations, being accompanied by another phenomenon: Caesarism.¹¹⁹

The rise of personalist leadership marks a partial return to nature. It is usually preceded by great wars or revolutions that demolish the ancient forms and leave a path open to a leading figure, which Spengler calls “Caesar.”¹²⁰ This momentary relapse back to primitive life occurs due to the accident of great individuals and their repeated struggle for position.¹²¹ A true leading figure can take advantage of any regime to gain power. The notion of democratic right, where masses choose their own leaders, remains fiction. Whether it is control of soil, wealth, or rhetorical skill, leaders always emerge by exploiting all necessary means.¹²² This marks an end to the age of money and intellect and the return of the imperial age. Society returns to a pre-cultural mode of governance by means of strength and blood. Politics give in to their most primitive form of conquering spoils.¹²³

2.1.2 Elite overproduction

Spengler clearly establishes that the state of civilizational decline is closely tied to internal power relations and even poses their restructuring as a temporary remedy. With such importance placed on dynamics within social hierarchy, we must now examine them in greater detail. Peter Turchin does that in his book *End Times* from 2023. This work’s recent date of publication helps us contextualize decline in relation to social upheaval using data analysis of economic and demographic factors. Turchin approaches the study of history from the perspective of his biologist background. Like animal populations that

¹¹⁷ Spengler 1928, 485

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 464

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 310

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 419

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 339

¹²² *Ibid.*, 456

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 432

have boom-and-bust cycles, we discover similar recurring patterns in human society. From these cycles of political integration and disintegration, Turchin builds a model in which he identifies a basic set of forces over thousands of years. He applies these to the United States, seeing stagnant real wages combined with growing inequality, declining public trust, ballooning public debt, and overproduction of university graduates. These are leading indicators of political instability.¹²⁴

All large-scale human societies have a ruling class, as there is always a small proportion of the population that holds a disproportionate amount of power. Early states were war-made and therefore ruled by the warrior class. This laid the grounds for a cohesive, centralized state that evolved beyond using just naked force. Governing simply requires more efficient means of persuasion.¹²⁵ Turchin describes elites as “power holders,” who aren’t necessarily the most intelligent or hardworking individuals, but they have the means to influence other people.¹²⁶ In our contemporary world, we find that there are too many “elite aspirants,” even though the number of positions in the upper echelons remains fixed, which breeds conflict. He calls this crisis “elite overproduction.”¹²⁷ When the demand for positions of power exceeds their supply, those who fail to reach them become frustrated and fuel social discontent.¹²⁸

Elite overproduction leads to an increasing number of disaffected contenders who are more ruthless and thereby excluded from competition by other aspirants. These become the “counter-elites.”¹²⁹ Anti-establishment sentiment across the ideological spectrum creates demand for political entrepreneurs, who are members of the elite. Their strategy is to use the non-elite discontent to advance their careers. These counter-elites include populist politicians as well as famous revolutionaries of bourgeois backgrounds.¹³⁰ Turchin examines two of these: wealth and ideology. Understanding how these methods are used in the elites’ struggle for power also reveals their effect on elite production.

2.1.3 Rule of the Wealthy

The United States is de facto a plutocracy, meaning that the elites source their power from wealth. The corporate community is at the top of its hierarchy, with owners, managers, bankers, and lawyers influencing all sectors of public policy. Lobbying by big business is

¹²⁴ Turchin 2023, 5

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 72

highly effective and non-transparent. Large political donors not only directly shape election outcomes by funding campaigns but also exchange influence by offering job security to elected politicians once their term is up, i.e., the “revolving door policy.” They control the ideological basis for power, owning media and funding think tanks.¹³¹ Economic elites lack a power center. Unlike military elites, there is no commanding hierarchy, but a loose network of societies, boards, and professional groups. Power is decentralized and distributed to thousands of individuals. This makes it nigh impossible to identify who is really in charge, as this complex network is also shrouded in secrecy.¹³²

Most plutocracies transform into mixed economy welfare states, and America was on a similar path during its Progressive Era. Industrialization led to the creation of a concentrated working class that organized its own counter-elites and was able to push for their demands through organized action.¹³³ However, racial division made the fruits of progressive reforms accessible only to the White working class as part of a compromise with the segregationist regime. This is why the civil rights movement pushed to expand the social contract to the Black working class.¹³⁴ The plutocrats responded by using the age-old strategy of dividing the working class by identity, which was not an option in homogeneous European countries. Opening access to Black workers made the labor market more competitive and allowed for suppression of wages.¹³⁵

The continuous growth of GDP combined with stagnant wages and a relatively constant volume of state revenue means that the only place where the surplus can go is to the elites. This wealth pump fuels elite overproduction, and instability ensues. Ironically, it is the wealthy that stand most to lose from political turbulence.¹³⁶ The American ruling class has found itself in a position threatened by a large swath of the population that holds academic degrees, which is prime breeding ground for the counter-elites. Turchin calls this a “revolutionary situation.” Reversing it would require reforms that address inequality and elite overproduction, as has been done in the past.¹³⁷

2.1.4 Ideological reconfiguration

Justification for wealth to remain the primary source of power requires an ideological base. Instability and realignment often shake up the system to its core and reconfigure

¹³¹ Turchin 2023, 84

¹³² *Ibid.*, 86

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 94

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 96

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 143

society to such a degree that different elites with different power sources may emerge. According to Turchin, there are three phases of ideological evolution within the societal cycle. The overpopulated elite and elite aspirants break into factions, which in the second phase challenge the state that lost legitimacy, resulting in its collapse. The ideological factions then fight among themselves until one of them gains the upper hand and stabilizes authority, forming a new state and reconstructing its institutions in its own ideological image.¹³⁸

We have now progressed into an unprecedented era of especially radical ideological fragmentation. The entire postwar consensus has been dissolving due to several factors. On the cultural front, normative family values have been supplanted by alternative lifestyles, gender roles were shattered, abortion was normalized, racism has been deinstitutionalized, and civil creed has been secularized. On the economic front, we saw the uprooting of labor unions, abandoned commitments to maintain a minimum wage at pace with inflation, taxation became less progressive, the welfare system more limited and limits on immigration were reduced. This abrupt shift to neoliberalism destabilized our regime while fueling opposition from ever more radical ideologues.¹³⁹

The contemporary ideological conflicts have so far been somewhat self-contained, serving as a tool to reduce the quantity of both established elites and elite aspirants. In the past, the result of these conflicts would be violent revolutions or civil wars, with losing factions being purged through mass executions, deportations, or imprisonment. Today, they are disposed of more mildly, like through social discreditation that we call “cancel culture.”¹⁴⁰ Despite this, Turchin’s mathematical models predict major social turbulence. Two-thirds of possible outcomes result in a massive reduction of the elite population due to a major economic crisis. Three-fourths of all simulated crises ended in revolutions or civil wars. 60 percent even include state collapse.¹⁴¹

2.1.5 Avoiding collapse

Turchin’s theory contains declinist markers insofar as it observes a natural cycle of societies rising and falling as impacted by naturally occurring phenomena. It also agrees that modern human society finds itself in the disintegrative phase of the societal cycle. Sooner or later, despotic elites have historically always ended up being overthrown by the common people. Squaring up this idea with that of the Caesarean political relapse yields

¹³⁸ Turchin 2023, 67

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 73

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 144

interesting results. Like Spengler, Turchin sees the incumbent plutocratic regime as destined to collapse due to its inbuilt deficiencies. The rule of monied elites in America strongly resembles a pre-Caesarean regime of money and intellect. Descent into oligarchy and the overbearing extraction of resources from the population breed resentment and create fertile ground for upheaval and counter-ideologies in opposition to plutocratic rule.

Turchin goes on to describe how, from the pool of disaffected elite aspirants, strongmen leaders emerge. But instead of being a temporary remedy to offset declinist symptoms, he represents yet another step toward social collapse. They are divisive figures generated from the ranks of counter-elites, and their rule usually brings more conflict and discord.¹⁴² Spengler sees the Caesar that overthrows the rule of money not as a product of the counter-elites, but as a great figure that is naturally endowed with abilities that destine him to rule. Caesar may even be a plutocrat that uses his wealth to seize power and only then uses force to liquidate the power of other plutocrats to consolidate his own.

Another difference between Turchin and Spengler is the scale of the collectives they focus on. While Spengler discusses civilizations, Turchin looks at how demographic fluctuation affects states and societies. Elite crisis is only a stage in a process; the subsequent regeneration can theoretically help civilizational vitality in the long run. Despite this, the theory of elite production is still concerned with declinist symptoms within the West and therefore relevant to our research. Turchin's argument is close to that of Spengler, with both authors viewing this as something inherent to humanity. However, he doesn't see the cycle as some unchangeable constant, claiming that we can learn from these past debacles by continuing to experiment with different social arrangements that keep the elites in check, allowing commoners to share the benefits of growth.¹⁴³ The collapse of American society is a highly likely occurrence, but not an inevitable one, leaving room for course correction.

After all, the length of the disintegrative cycle of disintegration was historically affected by several factors, like, for example, polygamy. In the West, powerful men would enter extramarital relationships, but in other civilizations the effect of elite overproduction would be exacerbated because of polygamy.¹⁴⁴ This effectively shortens the length of the social cycle. According to Turchin's calculations, the rate of dynastic turnovers, the rise and fall of entire empires, would be two to three hundred years in monogamous societies, while in polygamous societies it would be a century or less.¹⁴⁵ Sociocultural behaviors are

¹⁴² Turchin 2023, 24

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 155

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 34

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35

subject to change, and over time, they can be adapted to create more stable and prosperous societies.

2.2 Who is in revolt?

From Turchin's theory of elite overproduction, we have deduced core material causes for social upheaval. But to understand how this unrest challenges not just existing hierarchical structures but also the stability of Western civilization is a much more difficult task. We have established that the elites vs. counter-elites conflict defines historic cycles of social collapse. Counter-elites can challenge the status quo only when there is widespread discontent caused by economic deprivation that, if persistent, may erupt into a full-fledged revolt. In this chapter, we examine revolt phenomena within the West from the perspective of two social critics: José Ortega y Gasset and Christopher Lasch. Our aim is to understand how big of a role elites really play in the disintegrative process.

2.2.1 The elites and the masses

In 1929, shortly after the completion of Spengler's two volumes on Western decline, José Ortega y Gasset addressed a similar topic in *The Revolt of the Masses*. According to him, the greatest crisis facing European civilization is the complete takeover of the "masses" over public life.¹⁴⁶ "Mass" is not defined only by the plentitude of individuals but also by their averageness. It is a mindset found in persons that feel themselves to be "just like everybody." There are those who make great demands of themselves and overcome challenges, while others strive only for comfort, avoiding a demanding life. The former constitute "select minorities," and the latter are the masses.¹⁴⁷

Mass man lacks self-reflection; his arrogance blinds him to any of his imperfections. On the other hand, the "select man" is critical of his own actions and seeks others' approval to reflect on them.¹⁴⁸ This phenomenon manifests itself in the mass man's "intellectual hermetism," which is unbothered with finding truth and maintains his opinion despite all reason contradicting it. They are mere reflections of his appetite.¹⁴⁹ The advance of liberal democracy and technological progress has also stripped the previously oppressed

¹⁴⁶ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 11

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 69

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73

individual of most prior limits, making him spoiled and ungrateful.¹⁵⁰ This behavior is present in both the upper and lower classes, as what used to be reserved for only the uniquely gifted has been made accessible to the many.¹⁵¹

In *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch grapples with Ortega's diagnosis of the mass man by applying it to the elites. To them he attributes the same deficiencies possessed by the mass man: a sense of entitlement over a sense of duty to the elites of today.¹⁵² The decline of "old money" elites leads to the decline of old money's ethic of loyalty and responsibility towards local society. Mobility of capital and globalized markets now allow elites to live a detached cosmopolitan life.¹⁵³ This means that the elites are effectively in revolt against middle America, which they label as "reactionary" and "repressive." They comprise a new aristocracy that shrugs at anything regional as close-minded while embracing a migratory, supranational lifestyle. New money elites are constantly in transit, viewing the world as tourists rather than participants.¹⁵⁴

As much as social mobility has increased, the segregation of social classes has too. A common culture is lost, with meritocracy making the elites feel secure in their privilege while nullifying working-class opposition.¹⁵⁵ The supposed academic radicals have become gatekeepers of affluent homogeneity, as they gave up communicating with a broader audience by adopting over-professionalized jargon. Humanities are now accessible only to specialists who justify this exclusion using critical theory, which dismisses plain speech as "oppressive" and politically incorrect.¹⁵⁶ The fundamental choice a democratic society must make is whether to raise the general level of competence and virtue or broaden the recruiting pool for its elites.¹⁵⁷

Ortega and Lasch agree on the character of the present crisis but diverge when identifying the culprit. Ortega thinks that modern society is governed by the mass man, while Lasch says it is the elites that really hold most power in the contemporary world.¹⁵⁸ Unlike Lasch, Ortega thinks these attitudes are prevalent in both the upper and lower classes but are most pronounced in the middle class, which has superseded both workers and

¹⁵⁰ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 58

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16

¹⁵² Lasch 1995, 27

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 43

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 178

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 79

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27

aristocrats in its collective power.¹⁵⁹ However, they both critique identical social pathologies: ignorance, irresponsibility, and amorality.

2.2.2 Revolt against competence

According to Ortega, the fundamental problem of the mass man is that he is incapable of steering the complex and subtle process of civilization.¹⁶⁰ Civilizational progress has outpaced the progress of man, who is still essentially rooted in nature. This is why he is unable to adapt to its complexity, choosing to view it as a natural habitat. As life becomes better, it also becomes more complicated and less comprehensible. This essentially leads to a continuous loss of historical memory.¹⁶¹ A gigantic new heap of human beings that has been thrust on earth can hardly comprehend his unique place in history. While lacking relationship to tradition or any sense of continuity, the mass quickly gained the confidence to seize absolute control and judge the world only in its contemporary context.¹⁶²

This results in a general erosion of any capability to rule. Europe is losing its confidence, no longer innovating or taking on responsibility, instead sinking into custom and routine.¹⁶³ Despite Europe's great potential, it is hindered by impotence and weighed down by depression and pessimism.¹⁶⁴ Creative life must be conditioned by obedience, the acceptance of leadership, and enthusiastic commitment to its cause.¹⁶⁵ Ortega therefore proposes an ordering of public affairs where the mass would be required not to act on its own but to be ordered, directed, and represented by "superior minorities."¹⁶⁶

Ortega sees nobility as a trait of excellence and overcoming oneself, rather than an attribute of birth. In fact, hereditary aristocracy is decadent in essence, since it is bestowed with riches and possibilities without having done anything to earn them. Blue blood is condemned to represent accomplished ancestors. This atrophied mode of life means that one cannot live his individual destiny or be an authentic embodiment of his predecessors. As a result, they become nobody, an embodiment of mass man.¹⁶⁷ Qualified minorities that, to him, constitute the real social aristocracy are being removed

¹⁵⁹ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 108

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 67

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 91

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 51

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 144

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 146

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 145

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 115

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 99

from their rightful positions by the quantitative pressure of the mass, which demands complete subordination to averageness. Creative processes as well as values of excellence that are necessary to maintain a thriving society are demolished as a result.

This seems completely at odds with Lasch's view. He sees meritocracy as a tool of the elites to solidify their power, as well as a justification to use it as they wish.¹⁶⁸ Wealth used to be understood as carrying civil obligations, which the privileged upheld through philanthropy. Today, the wealthy are insulated within their own worlds.¹⁶⁹ Honest manual labor lost respect, with good work now constituted by abstract office work that removes a person from the physical side of life. This social construction of reality creates a "hyperreality" where all experience that resists human control is selectively excluded. The thinking class becomes obsessed with control, insisting that reality must be regulated and sanitized according to their sensitivities.¹⁷⁰

Since the self-made elite has little ancestral gratitude for their privileges, it lacks any attachment to the notion of inherited responsibility. Power doesn't come with a code of chivalry but rests on perceived intelligence.¹⁷¹ This built-up self-esteem manifests in oppressive ways, like the disposal of those that fail to climb the educational ladder. Elites are recruited primarily from the ranks of the academically credentialed. Upper middle classes pass accumulated advantages onto their children, virtually guaranteeing their advancement, which de facto makes them hereditary. At the same time, they recruit the most able from lower ranks, thereby draining them of effective leadership, which would challenge the elite grip on society.¹⁷²

2.2.3 Revolt against responsibility

The material and quantitative pressure exerted by masses onto society leads to uniformization, crushing beneath it all that is special, different, or excellent.¹⁷³ The mass, used to its superabundant possibilities, is compelled to abuse state power for its own means, seeing the state as a quick fix to any problem, crushing any spontaneous individual activity in the process.¹⁷⁴ The bureaucratization of social life suppresses the work of creative minorities, which generates most value. This leads to absolute decay: the

¹⁶⁸ Lasch 1995, 41

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 39

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 44

¹⁷³ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 18

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 120

diminishment of wealth and fertility rates.¹⁷⁵ The delegation of so much power to an unaccountable, self-serving apparatus means that when society stops being productive enough to support it, the state will resort to importing foreigners at the expense of the native population. Statist doctrine therefore reduces humans to replaceable cogs in the machine.¹⁷⁶

Social obligation has become depersonalized and effectively collectivized. It is now the state's duty to care for the disadvantaged, rather than the duty of the privileged. They enthusiastically push for policies of inclusion and social justice if it only burdens the working class but continue to be highly exclusive towards anyone of lower rank.¹⁷⁷ Denationalization of businesses produces a class of cosmopolitans who see themselves only as world citizens but without the usual civic obligation, as they remain unaccountable to any specific polity. Therefore, instead of funding public services, the elites will focus on improving only their enclosed enclaves and avoid social expenditures by dodging taxes.¹⁷⁸ The market preempts all public space as people retreat into private spaces. This results in the cosmopolitan phenomenon; urban conglomerations do not need to have anything in common with each other. American suburbs are a representation of these atomized units without a shared community.¹⁷⁹

2.2.4 Revolt against morals

Mass man doesn't accept any authority external to himself.¹⁸⁰ Instead, the entirety of public life has been subordinated to his directionless drifting. There is no program for the future, and authorities respond only to immediate circumstances.¹⁸¹ This signals a new trend in Europe, which is to get rid of discussion and take direct action instead. Recourse to violence becomes a self-justifying annulment of all norms, unleashing barbarism upon society. Masses use direct action to dismantle all remaining restrictions, including, for example, good manners or sexual restraint.¹⁸² Mass men think that the highly advanced and successful Western civilization can simply be upgraded for a newer model, like a machine. However, despite the fervent enthusiasm to dismantle existing structures, there exist no concrete replacements.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁵ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 121

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 122

¹⁷⁷ Lasch 1995, 45

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 47

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 128

¹⁸⁰ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 63

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 49

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 75

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 135

Lasch holds a very similar view of moral disintegration. The skeptical, iconoclastic state of mind has led to the replacement of the very concept of sin with “sickness” and the offering of mere therapeutic solutions to transcendental and existentialist issues.¹⁸⁴ Psychoanalysis succeeded religion and created a nonjudgmental social setting, leaving room to justify any unjust practices. Collective problems are reduced to individual psychological phenomena, offering self-help instead of needed systematic changes.¹⁸⁵ The abolishing of shame also removes an important social self-regulation.¹⁸⁶ Within our culture of acceptance, children are enabled to do, think, and feel whatever they want instead of being raised. This undeserved approval will, of course, lead to unrestrained narcissism and the collapse of any objective standards of competence.¹⁸⁷

To summarize, both Ortega and Lasch base their critique on moralist grounds. They identify a decline in social responsibility resulting from historical ignorance and a lack of values and explain how this then leads to disintegration. The revolt is a destructive force that doesn’t purify society but rather infects it more with terminal symptoms. Both authors view the formation of common norms and values as a highly complex process where we struggle to find out what works and what doesn’t. Careless uprooting of existing order is not only antithetical to civilizational continuity but also risks the abrupt undoing of the fragile balance needed for upholding society. Instead of moving with caution, revolts want to do away with the old, not accounting for unforeseen consequences and offering little in terms of functional alternatives. The revolt represents a repudiation of virtue, being complexly antithetical to vitality, and therefore must be overcome.

2.2.5 Democracy, Meritocracy, and Dictatorship

Despite agreeing on what the revolt phenomena are, each author sees a remedy to them within completely different ideas. On one hand, Ortega’s elitist view of society means he proposes the rule by a qualified minority of the best and most talented over the rest. Lasch criticizes this meritocratic doctrine for increasing the recruiting pool of the elites, which entrenches their power, further allowing them to be more detached from acting responsibly towards society. He instead proposes democracy, which is something Ortega would be skeptical of due to further enabling the mass man. Let us now compare these positions in the context of Spengler’s Caesarean relapse, which is a solution antithetical to the values of both authors.

¹⁸⁴ Lasch 1995, 216

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 218

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 204

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 206

Both Ortega and Spengler agree that urban agglomeration is a driver of the declinist phenomena. Epoch of the masses means colossal buildings, dense cities, and a subsequent demographic decline.¹⁸⁸ Both authors also see human organization as being aristocratic by nature. Ortega even says that to the degree that society ceases to be aristocratic, it also ceases to be a society at all.¹⁸⁹ But while Spengler believes that true leadership can never really be displaced and will inevitably reoccur, Ortega laments the directionless drifting of the mass becoming the new social order. This means that his worldview is much less fatalistic, with the revolt being a result of specific human actions rather than destiny.

Ortega also questions the very notion of declinism, because it implies that there is an identifiable “height of times” from which we have descended. If we do not give preference to life in any previous period, we cannot truly call our time decadent.¹⁹⁰ A true state of decline means accepting the narrative of a superior past as a matter of reality and resigning from the belief that a better future is even possible. Therefore, the true state of decadence is one where vitality itself is being lost.¹⁹¹ Instead, Ortega thinks the West is a victim of its own success. The advent of modernity and quantitative increase in production has created such a surplus of people and possibilities, leading to the average majority overwhelming the qualified minority.

While Spengler and, to a lesser degree, Ortega view democracy as a catalyst of decline, Lasch sees it as a remedy. When the power of elites is not kept under control by at least a common societal ethic, that’s when we see them actively revolt against the rest of the population. Their outsized influence guarantees them and their own kind a perpetual immunity from any responsibility to their nation or locality, since they can operate above and beyond them. The hunt for immediate gratification and planned obsolescence undermined the moral foundations of the family, leading to rising divorce rates and declining birth rates.¹⁹²

Lasch shares with Spengler a critical view of cosmopolitanism, which to him means atomization of individuals that undermines community life. However, his populist stance can hardly be considered equivalent to Caesarism. On the contrary, Lasch prescribes a radical form of democracy of propertied citizens. Only the widest possible distribution of

¹⁸⁸ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 19

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 44

¹⁹² Lasch 1995, 96

property cultivates virtues like self-reliance and self-governance.¹⁹³ Neither the free market nor the welfare state will repair social trust, as both are corrosive to the family and people's self-sufficiency.¹⁹⁴ This is why Lasch embraces classical American populism rooted in small proprietorship and personal responsibility.¹⁹⁵

The primary divergence between Spengler and the revolt scholars comes down to the role of a singular leading figure within the process of social disintegration. Ortega and Lasch try to characterize a dynamic between mass and elite populations and then apply it to its effect on society, identifying corrosive trends. Spengler sees the movement of populations as being tied to the destinies of select figures. All life is finite, so are Ceasar and his empire. While he may temporarily mitigate or even pause declinist tendencies, he cannot undo them, as he is still bound by the natural lifecycle of the soul. Neither Ortega nor Lasch speaks of a necessary dictatorship by virtue of naturally defusing the revolt and establishing a more functional society.

2.3 Elite crisis within the social cycle

While Ortega and Lasch both diagnose the same declinist symptoms, they diverge when it comes to identifying who is responsible for them. One says that they are the result of a mass revolt against qualified minorities; the other blames them on the increasingly unaccountable elites revolting against the rest of society. Reconciling these two opposing views requires that we apply Turchin's elite overproduction theory. Turchin observes a cycle of societies rising and falling as impacted by naturally occurring phenomena. Each integrative period is followed by a disintegrative one. When the population is still low, the much greater carrying capacity of the territory allows for growth of birth rates, wages, and productivity. Then the Malthusian limit kicks in. Population density becomes too large, leading to a higher spread of disease, further enabled by globalized trade networks, which knocks the population back down.¹⁹⁶

Turchin uses the Hundred Years' War as an interesting case study. The conflict was preceded by and largely coincided with famines and plagues that roughly halved the French population. Feudal nobility still attempted to prevent loss of revenue by extracting more from fewer peasants, causing social unrest. The English invasion came at the same time, commencing a century of disconnected hostilities that took advantage of the weakened French state. However, despite large victories of the English, no permanent

¹⁹³ Lasch 1995, 8

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 92

¹⁹⁶ Turchin 2023, 38

territorial gain was yielded. Instead, the wars helped depopulate the nobility while uniting the French commoners under one banner. This means that war helped France overcome its elite overpopulation problem and explains why the country achieved relative prosperity in the following centuries.¹⁹⁷

Elite overproduction is conditioned by a preceding period of prosperity. We start from the premise that new elites must be constantly generated, recruited from a pool of aspirants. In the case of the plutocratic regime in America, this is done through capitalistic competition, where no member of the elite may ever be completely secure in their position. The system has generated immense wealth and resulted in rapid industrialization, increased productivity, and living standards improvement. The subsequent population boom swelled up the ranks of elite aspirants way beyond the available capacity of the elite pool itself. The labor oversupply then allowed for stagnation of wages and the ever-larger appropriation of surplus by the elites.¹⁹⁸

This means that Ortega and Lasch are not necessarily contradicting each other. They're describing the same cycle but each from the perspective of a different time. Ortega wrote in the early 20th century, during the period of a great population boom and the springing up of revolutionary movements. Society experienced pressure from below, with industrialization proliferating consumer lifestyles and greater social demands. Lasch wrote in the late 20th century, witnessing the onset of stagnant growth and increasing inequality. He observed the pressure from above that came from globalization that allowed for capital flight and detachment of the wealthy from the rest. This means that while symptoms of disintegration remain the same, their source could vary depending on the phase society finds itself in.

Overall, Turchin finds more common ground with Lasch than Ortega. After all, he writes in the 2020s with much greater hindsight, seeing the results of the accumulated declinist symptoms described by the two authors. Both Turchin and Lasch would agree that the recruiting pool for elites is becoming wider while the elite is becoming more extractive and exclusive. To clarify, Ortega doesn't exclude the elites from his critique either; he claims that disintegrative behavior has spread to both lower and upper classes. However, he sources this to the median man, the average middle class that has, by its own stubbornness, imposed its mediocrity on society. Lasch, on the other hand, exalts the virtue of the middle classes, seeing them as the bastion of the preferred values: traditional morality and self-sufficiency.

¹⁹⁷ Turchin 2023, 29

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171

Either way, all authors identify some form of a crisis that is plaguing the elite. All three agree that the elites are succumbing to disruptive events, regardless of whether they blame them for it or not. Using Turchin's theory, we have managed to reconcile the findings of Ortega and Lasch, but we also resolved the question of accountability, which was posed at the end of Part 1. As the power brokers in society, elites must earn their privilege by taking on accountability, whether they are able to control social processes or not. Regardless of his conclusion that elite crises come about from a cyclical demographic process, Turchin still believes that the length of the cycle is contingent on human ability to adapt and create more functional social systems.

Part 3: Civilization and social class

In prior parts of the thesis, we have utilized the findings from a multitude of authors to establish unified theories of Western declinism and elite crisis. To answer our research questions, we must examine how these two intersect. Correlating loss of civilizational vitality and the rise in social upheaval is not a straightforward process. After all, can't it be argued that overthrowing stagnant regimes of decadent ruling classes might help reinvigorate civilization? Or is civilization partially defined by its hierarchy, and getting rid of it would undo the whole structure? Here we find clues in three declinist phenomena identified by civilizational scholars and three kinds of revolt as understood by the social critics. Finding overlap between these two groups of academics will allow for the formation of a comprehensive framework, which will be key in establishing elite crisis as a declinist symptom.

3.1 The revolt against civilization

The three tendencies that tear the fabric of civilization are spiritual, institutional, and territorial forms of decline. The three behaviors that have a disintegrative effect on society are the revolts against competence, responsibility, and morals. Reconciling such a wide array of complex social phenomena requires finding similarities and matching each declinist argument to a corresponding type of revolt. The revolt is conceptually different from decline. One implies a dynamic movement in society and radical remodeling of power structures, while the other means a continuous trend of stagnation and downsizing of social activity. However, as was shown previously, the way that these two concepts are perceived by the discussed authors is not too different from each other.

Toynbee's conception of a spiritual decline certainly resembles a sort of revolt against morals. Like Ortega and Lasch, he is critical of religious depletion in the West. The excessive materialism that governs society leads to the dismantling of fundamental societal norms, leaving a void that longs to be filled. While Ortega and Lasch perceive this trend from a purely critical moralist stance, Toynbee adds that the void will inevitably be filled by a new form of religiousness that topples the materialistic West in the future. Contrary to Ortega, he sees the masses, especially the oppressed proletariat, as grassroots for a church that will lay foundations for a new, more universal civilization.

He agrees with Lasch that the dominant minority is to blame but uses different means to substantiate this. Lasch thinks the elite effort to further its power is projected internally, into the moral fabric of society. It transforms bad behavior into an excusable pathology,

and through its non-judgmental approach further enables the elites to lower social expectations placed on them. Toynbee, on the other hand, sees civilization using an objective standard, where its spiritual failing directly implies its own undoing. The more materialistic a civilization is, the less it is a civilization. Exploitative behavior by the powerful is itself a barbaric repudiation of anything civil. While many past civilizations were built on brutal forms of oppression, this may be understood as a necessary evil due to a lack of technological advancement. In ancient times, slave labor was a necessary component for the completion of magnificent works.¹⁹⁹ However, modernity has made such exploitation indefensible.

Meanwhile, the topic of institutional decline posed by Quigley is closely linked to the question of responsibility. The process of bureaucratization causing suppression of creative activity, choking out value, is something that Ortega references as well. However, Quigley thinks this process is a direct result of the vested interests that entrench themselves into key positions to extract surplus needed for reinvestment. Ortega thinks this is due to the state apparatus becoming a mass tool to suppress the most qualified individuals that generate the most value. While Quigley blames excessive entrenchment of experts for the resulting decline in output, Ortega blames their displacement in favor of uniformity. These two are not necessarily in contradiction. They are both a result of unaccountable institutions.

The trend of diminishing responsibility is traced by Lasch to self-serving elites. He observes the disintegration in the quality of public goods and services, attributing them to the apathy of the cosmopolitan class, which has lost its relationship with locality. Quigley finds fault for such dysfunction mainly due to the inability to innovate, resulting in the depletion of surplus for indulgent expenses of the vested interests. While Lasch critiques a failure to conserve functioning institutions, Quigley points to a lack of progress. The instruments of production must constantly adapt to keep functioning. Both authors would agree that the elites are withholding necessary investment into these instruments, with Lasch focusing on how this impacts the quality of social welfare and Quigley considering the effects on private ventures and the total economic output.

We now arrive at grievances levied at the territorial power decline of the West by Burnham and Huntington. Here we find some crossover with the elite crisis of competence because of the loss of historical memory. After dominating global affairs for as long as it has, the West has forgotten that this is hardly the default state of things but a historical anomaly. The authors would agree with both Ortega and Lasch that there is a lack of ancestral gratitude and an ignorance of how difficult it was to attain this level of civilizational

¹⁹⁹ Toynbee 1948, 26

development. Huntington emphasizes this by highlighting the violent past of Western expansion that is hardly being acknowledged. Instead, many Westerners started viewing their civilization as mere consumerist culture that upholds universal values and that must lead the world on a path to progress.

Upholding this narrative requires a very narrow, sanitized view of history. Lasch points to elites' obsession with political correctness that is meant to emancipate underprivileged groups but instead disenfranchises them by gatekeeping the use of academic language. Burnham shares the critique of liberal ideology, regarding it as a resignation of the West. Liberals disarm their own civilization based on preferential treatment of the less privileged non-Western peoples, which they regard as their moral duty. The result is withdrawal from other countries, which allows for communism to take root. Huntington, who writes in a post-Cold War world, gives non-Western civilizations more agency, arguing that they have emancipated themselves rather than just waited for the West to be weakened by its internal ideology.

All authors point to an increasing gap in virtue and ability between members of the ruling class and those who work for them. There seems to be no reciprocity, with little value being added by the self-serving elite. Instead, it keeps withholding more and more resources for itself, breaking and reshaping norms to allow for this transfer of wealth. At the same time, the authors note the decreasing size of the total wealth caused by elite incompetence, which further squeezes those at the bottom. Authors then predict the undoing of the Western world due to internal upheaval, which is manifested either by ideological phenomena, moral collapse, or institutional decay. It is then followed by external threats that exploit these civilizational weaknesses.

3.2 Why are the elites in crisis?

We now have a unified idea of the elite crisis as a catalyst for declinist symptoms, where short-term individual gratification is being traded for society's long-term viability. Another idea that keeps reoccurring among the researched authors is that of the cyclical development. As civilizations rise and fall, so do states and societies. While they do not agree on whether this is an inevitable destiny, they all agree that the cycles have been a historical constant and that the West has most likely passed its zenith already. However, according to authors like Quigley and Turchin, countries in the West already went through several crises, with reoccurring declinist symptoms that were addressed through reform. Once again, we return to the question of agency. Are the elites really at the mercy of factors beyond their control?

The West is, like every civilization, governed by a multitude of elite populations. Spengler calls this a democracy, while Turchin calls it a plutocracy, but both agree that the incumbent system uses wealth rather than military means to govern. The economic might of the elites is challenged by the ideological force of the counter-elites. The larger the disparity in wealth accumulation between the elites and the rest, the larger the discontent, which lends itself to the ideological exploitation. An overpopulated pool of elite aspirants supplies an ever-larger selection of appealing radical solutions, which threaten to undo most basic foundations of Western societies. The masses do play a role insofar as they aid counter-elites in gaining power.

The fact that civilization was flourishing prior to its decline means that during that time, the elite managed to maintain ascendancy in social development before something changed. This leads us back to the research question posed at the introduction of the thesis. Our findings support the claim that elite crisis, as conceived of by the selected authors, does play an outsized role in fueling civilizational decline. Now we may try to settle whether it is a change in elite structure that causes this or whether it is a change of elite behavior. On this topic, the authors remain divided. On one hand, we have Spengler, Ortega, Burnham, and Lasch, who claim that elite crisis is a result of displacement by some form of a new, more decadent elite. On the other, Toynbee and Quigley suggest it is the greedier and more apathetic actions of the elites that have led to the present crisis.

3.2.1 Rotation of social roles

As Spengler has pointed out, the traditional castes of aristocracy and priesthood, whose power is rooted in the soil, have been displaced by an urban caste that manipulates the rest of society through money and intellect. His conception of aristocracy is not just hereditary but tribal in essence. Rather than a fact of virtue or competence, nobility comes from the soul. To him, dynasties are organically occurring outgrowths of a people with a common destiny, with their struggle for dominance being the default state of politics. However, as society concentrates into the metropolis and embraces more complex cultural forms, the power shifts towards pure thought. The new ruling class is that of intellectuals and financiers, with both being detached from the country and the soul due to their urban disposition.

In Ortega's account, the power in society has been concentrated in the hands of the mass man, which is a mentality rather than a group of people. Yet, he attributes this mentality primarily to people of the middle classes. Among them, it is the "science man," like a doctor or an engineer, that now occupies social primacy. He is not easily classed as learned or ignorant; rather, he is specialized. He adopts ignorant attitudes with all the

confidence of a learned intellectual due to his supposed qualifications. It doesn't matter that his scope of knowledge is severely limited to his niche profession.²⁰⁰ The mass man that took charge in society doesn't necessarily have to be unintelligent, but he is too oriented within his expert niche, which is why his understanding is so mechanistic.

Burnham, who equates Western decline with its embrace of liberalism, claims that some social groups have more liberal tendencies based on their professional needs. For example, few military men are liberals due to being professionally compelled by rigid hierarchies and collective services over individual freedoms and equality.²⁰¹ Another group that Burnham considers overwhelmingly anti-liberal are large businessmen, especially those working in primary economic fields and manufacturing, while managers, bankers, and heirs to wealth tend to be more liberal. Professionals also are a varied group, where the "more verbal" professions like lawyers have a higher ratio of liberals than "less verbal" ones like doctors. Rural folk and farmers are also among the least liberal groups.²⁰²

The highest saturation of liberals can instead be found in colleges and across the whole educational system. Across the West, institutions of higher learning have become rigidly liberal and saturated with socialism too. Writers, journalists, and intellectuals are too overwhelmingly liberal. Social workers, bureaucrats, administrators, and other state employees are much more inclined to liberalism than those who operate in profit-making organizations.²⁰³ Going beyond simple social categories, the general sway of liberalism on public opinion in Western societies can be attributed to a shift in the composition of the elites. The classes that work with manipulation of words, ideas, and experiences gradually gained more key institutional positions over classes with local attachments and fixed identities.²⁰⁴

As the most explicit critic of elite behavior, Lasch would agree with much of Burnham's assessment, especially pointing to the shift of power away from those that are fixed in their locality. He claims that the wealthy have quite literally withdrawn from community and their locality due to new money displacing the old. Globalization resulted in wealth being tied to markets and capitalization rather than a specific locality and its labor force. The new money secures its power with meritocracy, believing itself to be generated from competence rather than inheritance. The new elite is a rootless one, free from obligation to any specific population. It is this mentality that leads to further social disintegration,

²⁰⁰ Ortega y Gasset 1932, 112

²⁰¹ Burnham 1964, 240

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 242

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 244

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 249

as it also removes moral barriers and expectations that serve to regulate the behavior of the people in power.

3.2.2 Decadence of the privileged

On the opposite end stand those who detect an actual shift in how the same elites approach responsibility, which comes with their power. In his admonishment of class-based oppression, Toynbee points to how the privileged minority, which has always existed throughout the ages, has become even more unjust with the advance of modernity. Technological progress has made much of the suffering in the world unnecessary, yet brutal forms of exploitation continue. The inevitable result will be a global proletarian uprising against colonial rule, which will serve as the basis for the Western undoing, succeeded by a new religious awakening and new forms of civilization that will mark the continuation of humanity's progress.

For Quigley, the continuous cycle where productive instruments transform into unproductive institutions seems to be a historical constant. While the instruments change with time, the institution of class is a constant. The resulting conflict pits those who control the surpluses against everyone else due to their fear of social change.²⁰⁵ Class conflict then pours out into imperialist wars, since taking wealth from neighbors becomes the only apparent way to resolve the lack of growth domestically. This is encouraged by the vested interests since it helps them divert discontent elsewhere.²⁰⁶ This means that as elites become more entrenched in their position and productive capacity is reduced as a result, maintaining their current level of wealth means privatizing an ever-larger part of the surplus or commencing conflict, both of which threaten continuation of the social order.

While Toynbee and Quigley have provided good arguments for how elite behavior affects the state of civilization, their claims do not necessarily contradict the claims of the remaining authors. For example, Lasch would argue that class-based exploitation described by Toynbee is a result of the new money's lack of any social responsibility. Institutionalization as described by Quigley could also be matched to Ortega's critique of the statist tendency to encroach on creative minorities. All these explanations tie in with Turchin. Whether we are talking about incumbent elites, elite aspirants, or counter-elites, there seems to be excessive top-down pressure on society. Increasing demands are being

²⁰⁵ Quigley 1979, 151

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 152

levied at ordinary people to provide an ever-growing portion of their yields to provide capacity for either their status or their efforts to acquire status.

Lasch would point out that this is why elites need to recruit new members from lower ranks. They are not only unable to sustain themselves on their own but also need to co-opt all external talent to diffuse potential resistance. Turchin adds that this paradoxically leads to undermining their power long-term, with oversaturation of elite aspirants only showing how self-defeating such effort is. If we apply the same logic at a civilizational level, we see a similar trend. The West is unable to support itself from its own birthrates alone, relying on immigration of peoples from other civilizational backgrounds. Ortega blames the mass-governed state that needs to support itself by importing a labor force when its own workforce becomes weakened by the loss of its own vitality.

From this we conclude that the changes in elite behavior are a result of the cyclical demographic change in their composition. Prior civilizational success allowed for the social proliferation of ignorance and ingratitude, but that is hardly the full picture. The main fact remains that a complex set of changes in political values and technological advancement allowed for new types of elites to rise. Not only have aristocracy and clergy been relegated to the past as businessmen and intellectuals took their place, but elite ranks have become larger, expanding their recruiting pool as well. While emancipating some, this has led to lowered qualitative standards and higher quantitative demands of the new elites.

3.3 The West as the world's elite

So far there has been a consensus among the authors that the vitality of a people, be it the state, society, or a civilization, is correlated to how much its elite is rooted in a common experience with everyone else. The collective overcoming of adversity can hardly be done when there exists no responsibility of its leading component towards the rest, allowing it to become decadent. The less is expected from the ruling class, the less is received. This seemingly banal observation has broad implications. We may, for example, correlate the phenomenon of negative correlation between wealth and fertility. In the United States, there is a long-term trend where wealthier families also have lower birthrates.²⁰⁷ Despite the elites having higher disposable income to afford children, they tend to avoid the responsibility. If family is too much of a burden, how can they be liable for an entire society?

²⁰⁷ Vandenbroucke, 2016

The same question can be posed towards the West as a whole. By opening itself to migration, the West admits that its own population is incapable of sustaining itself and must look for productive workers from non-Western countries as an alternative. Hence, much of the debate over migration in the modern West is not based on ethical merits but on the question of who will generate the needed tax revenue to sustain pension payments for its aging population.²⁰⁸ As Turchin points out, this in fact serves the interests of the wealthiest in society, as a larger quantity of workers seeking jobs and housing lowers labor costs and increases yields from rent. It would therefore be contentious to say that the West represents a collective of global elites with a unified agenda. Class stratification within the West still generates divergent interests.

However, it would also be difficult to consider all laborers, regardless of their civilizational background, as part of a single global proletariat. For example, the immense wealth gap between the average Westerner and an average African, combined with the outflow of resources from Africa to the West, shows that we can hardly speak of a common cause.²⁰⁹ The cheaper the minerals and energies extracted from non-Western countries become, the higher the supply of affordable consumer goods that is generated. By acknowledging how this benefits common Westerners too, we discover an interesting intersection between class and civilization, which is worthy of further examination.

The assumption that Western decline is by default an elite crisis would require us to work with completely different definitions of civilization as a universal, class-based entity. After all, the small percentage of the global population that hails from Western countries enjoys an unparalleled level of purchasing power and material comfort compared to its counterparts, basically equating it to a global upper class. Immanuel Wallerstein and Etienne Balibar discuss this possibility in their 1988 work, *Race, Nation, Class*. Both authors take a critical stance towards Western imperialism and capitalism, but each offers a slightly different analysis of the possible intersection between culture-based civilization and a social class.

Balibar claims that any racial or national conflict can hardly be considered an expression of class struggle and rather represents a divisive element for the global proletariat.²¹⁰ According to him, the formation of a supranational Western identity served the common interest of colonial powers to institute a system of “White” superiority, a caste system of sorts. As such, civilization became a front for assimilating the world into a universalized racial hierarchy, where the White man holds a “burden” of responsibility for other races.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Fernández Campbell 2019

²⁰⁹ Curtis, Jones 2017

²¹⁰ Balibar, Wallerstein 1991, 12

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43

Wallerstein, meanwhile, views group consciousness as presently superseding class consciousness, possibly serving as a necessary manifestation of the latter. Even after decolonization, non-Western countries retain a bureaucratic class that is disproportionately White. This reflects unequal exchange between proletarian nations within the world economic system.²¹² Race as a class signifier is not relevant by virtue of skin color but as a fact of wealth distribution around the world. Non-White racial identity becomes a rally point for internationalist proletarian movements, and opposition to racial discrimination represents the common proletarian uprising against capitalist oppression.²¹³

This is remarkably like Toynbee's analysis of race-class intersection. He critiques the proliferation of racial prejudice by English speaking, considering it a catastrophe for humanity. In line with his moral-religious stance, he sees Islam as the main force that unites the non-Western proletariat in opposition to Western materialism and race-class hierarchy.²¹⁴ This means that the West must reckon with the possibility of a pan-Islamic revolt against its leadership, culminating in a race war of non-Western proletariat against the Western Whites.²¹⁵

On the other end of the spectrum, Burnham completely refutes these claims, stating that the West excessively embraces racial equality. To him, all colors and creeds are not alike. He believes that despite the liberal doctrine preaching brotherhood among men, the emancipated races will instead weaponize this doctrine against the white man and will suppress him instead. Freedom and equality are to him a purely Western notion that, when applied by Westerners to other civilizations, will be turned against them, since they believe in the notions of strength and conquest. This then creates the dialectical conditions for the Western contraction.²¹⁶

While Toynbee and Burnham talk of entirely opposite symptoms of decline, Wallerstein and Balibar dispute the notion of the West as being a myth that hides oppressive structures. Reconciling these widely differing perspectives is not possible and beyond the scope of this thesis. However, they do offer interesting critical perspectives that we should consider within our research. If we accept the universalist notion of a human civilization with a Western ruling class on top, many of the previously discussed topics, including lack of elite responsibility and the consequent upheaval and civilizational

²¹² Balibar, Wallerstein 1991, 197

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 199

²¹⁴ Toynbee 1948, 206

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212

²¹⁶ Burnham 1964, 237

degradation, hold great relevance. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will continue to focus only on social dynamics within the West.

Conclusion

“Such is the cycle of political revolution, the course appointed by nature in which constitutions change, disappear, and finally return to the point from which they started. Anyone who clearly perceives this may indeed in speaking of the future of any state be wrong in his estimate of the time the process will take, but if his judgement is not tainted by animosity or jealousy, he will very seldom be mistaken as to the stage of growth or decline it has reached, and as to the form into which it will change.”²¹⁷

Histories by Polybius

From time immemorial, humanity has had culture. While humans die and states go extinct, cultures always leave a mark. From ruins of grand cities to passed-down myths and legends, traces of even the most ancient cultures echo throughout the millennia. Forecasting when the West will also dissolve into a distant memory may be beyond the scope of our capabilities, but the ambitious attempts made by some academics deserve our attention. While Western civilization remains a living fact, it remains impossible to prove or disprove any declinist prognosis, but they remain insightful in our research of the current situation. As we have established in the introduction of this thesis, the contemporary Western discourse is marked by immense civilizational anxiety. The aim of our research was to evaluate declinist phenomena and understand why they might be occurring, offering a rational perspective to an often-emotional topic.

Understanding the foundational work of Western declinism by Oswald Spengler has been a key part of the process. Perhaps most importantly, it solidified what really constitutes civilizational decline at its base principle. Spengler understood history as the realization of a destiny-bound life cycle, a springing of organic forms animated by their distinct soul. The point of this thesis is not to uncritically accept these highly spiritual and philosophical notions but to subject them to reevaluation through the prism of other authors, whose work often sprung up in reaction to Spengler. As a result, we now have a comprehensive view of declinism that is not wholly reliant on metaphysics but is backed up by causality of demographic developments in conjunction with political organization.

This method has yielded several findings. First, civilizational development conditions its own circumstances for decline. Societies become more complex, and as a result, more volatile. Cities become more detached from the country, losing touch with the organic processes needed to sustain life. Material comfort breeds complacency, as lack of

²¹⁷ Polybius, Paton 2009, 250

adversity means less resilience towards potential upheaval. People start taking civilization for granted, becoming apathetic to its survival. They slide into moral relativism, no longer recognizing any value higher than their immediate self-gratification. Instead of being productive, they become parasitic, consuming an ever-higher share of surpluses instead of reinvesting them. This leads to contraction at all levels. Birth rates decline, territory is lost, and wealth diminishes. Civilization ends when these internal vulnerabilities allow for the collapse of the incumbent social order, most often caused by external factors.

This detailed account still doesn't answer the question of agency. Spengler believed that decline is a matter of destiny, an inescapable reality that may be offset only temporarily by returning to a more primitive mode of politics that reduces cultural complexity in favor of brute leadership. A deeper examination of the elites and their role in this disintegrative process became necessary, which yielded similar declinist symptoms: a lack of social responsibility, competence, and moral character. The cause of this crisis was traced to the theory of elite overproduction, relating to the overall swelling up of elite ranks. As their quantity increased, their quality decreased, overburdening society while offering little in return. The displacement of old elite virtues, which allowed it to steer society towards prosperity, results from the advancement of new elite groups that lack any sense of duty towards a larger collective, as they attempt to unbind themselves from any remaining expectations. This is followed by social upheaval and conflict over power from different challengers that capitalize on popular resentment against the elites to tear the whole system down.

In conclusion, the West is declining due to an overall loss of vitality, aided by the decadence of its own elites, which is conditioned by a prior age of prosperity. We cannot say whether this is a primary cause, but we can identify it as an important contributing factor. While this answers the research question, it opens even more inquiries worthy of further examination. For example, to what extent can this phenomenon be attributed to the diminishment of aristocratic forms of governance? Or, on the contrary, is this a result of bourgeois dominance reaching its logical limit within the class struggle? The results of our research may be interpreted in a variety of ways, which we leave to the reader. Before we pose any such question, it is essential that we reconcile whether the West is even worth saving. If the answer is in the negative, then any attempt at further examination is pointless. However, if we find the will to rekindle the Western project, a variety of exciting possibilities opens. Finding social remedies and crafting systems for elite recruitment can be the basis for a new discipline of civilizational renewal.

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