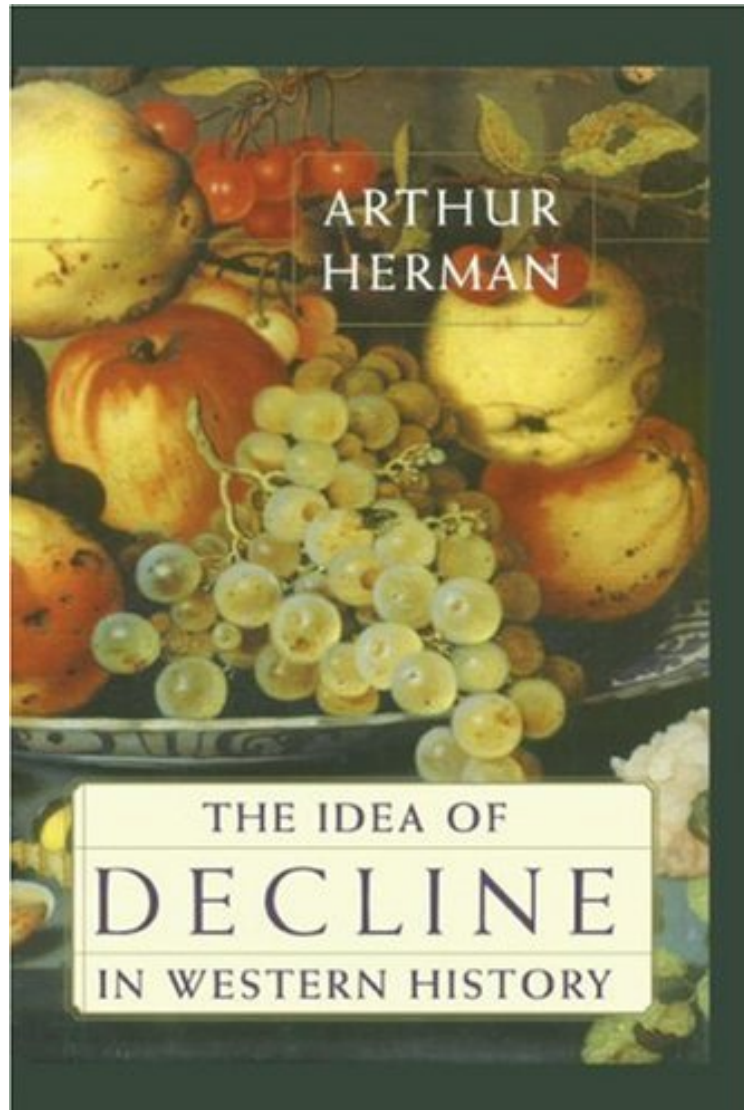


(Free and download) The Idea of Decline in Western History

## The Idea of Decline in Western History

*Arthur Herman*

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**Arthur Herman : The Idea of Decline in Western History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Idea of Decline in Western History:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. DecentBy Jeremy BrungerHerman is a spare conservative in other of his works and expresses a refreshing skepticism toward habitual skepticism. Thinkers like Spengler and Foucault provided important milestones for the viewpoint of pessimism--Spengler's time really was disintegrating, and Foucault was pessimistic in part because he was an intellectual and a gay man at a time when both were undergoing violent assaults (he started out as what he called a Nietzschean Marxist, so there you go). But Herman provides a bit of sanity

to counter-act the misery one witnesses in everyday life and continually points out that life has always been pretty rough for most people, but such a fact ought not negate the great achievements of the liberal society. He represents a classical view of conservatism rather than the mess of popular political representation that has persisted since the days of Goldwater. The book is just about first-rate and discusses some of my favorite themes in intellectual history, so I am biased toward the likes of Schopenhauer even in refutation. His thesis is that the idea of decline is perennial and always has been, which means either the pessimist or the progressivist is wrong, but one of them \*must\* be wrong about the general trend of history. For every impoverished locale a person sees, hears about, or happens to live in, it is only proper to remind oneself that such depressive things need not characterize society in general. A good antidote for intellectuals who tread in Franco-German philosophical waters or who think America is the worst in the world because it describes itself as the best and so must fall short. My central nitpick is the way Herman describes pessimism as silly, however seriously silly it is. There are reasons for the pessimistic mindset--good reasons, qua perennial reasons--and he tends to push them to the wayside. Were he a victim of such things I doubt he would have written this book, and so the bias of his birth and profession show through.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Of Supreme Importance  
By Peter T. Wolf  
This is one of the most important books I've ever read. And I read a GREAT DEAL. I hardly know where to begin praising it. First of all it is a tour de force of comprehensive scholarship and research. The author, Arthur Herman, tackles nothing less than the entire history of pessimistic thought and philosophy in the western world and reveals it as history's longest running fraud. Second: To write this book as well as he did required the mind boggling task of steeping himself in the writings of scores and scores of authors, ranging from ancient Greece to the 1990's. I have read Spengler and Toynbee and other books he references. They are vast undertakings. Yet Herman has gone way beyond that. Third: The author achieves a brilliant synthesis that runs throughout his centuries-long review. I was amazed at his mastery of the subject and sources which enabled him to link generation after generation of writers into a common theme. Through pitch-perfect timing, the author seeded his narrative with quotes and observations of writers that keeps the reader absolutely focused on his theme. Fourth: The book is beautifully written. Sharp, to the point, and efficiently edited, there's not an ounce of fat. Fifth: And most important. You will come away from this book with absolute disgust at the pretensions, hypocrisies and outright phoniness of many of these 'famous' doomsayers. As a Californian I was particularly enlightened as to the source of much of the bizarre justification for radical environmentalism and multiculturalism that permeates the purblind state Democratic party. That alone was worth the price of the book. In summary, it is not possible to over emphasize the importance of this book. Much as John F. Kennedy wanted to mandate the reading of Barbara Tuchmann's 'Guns of August' for all captains in the U.S. Navy, Arthur Herman's book should be required reading for all voters.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Cassandras in our midst.  
By Thomas Barnett  
An engaging journey through the history of pessimism, going all the way back to the Greeks. If you have friends that are real Cassandras, this book provides a wonderful description of the history of those who predict dread and gloom for the human race.

Historian Arthur Herman traces the roots of declinism and shows how major thinkers, past and present, have contributed to its development as a coherent ideology of cultural pessimism. From Nazism to the Sixties counterculture, from Britain's Fabian socialists to America's multiculturalists, and from Dracula and Freud to Robert Bly and Madonna, this work examines the idea of decline in Western history and sets out to explain how the conviction of civilization's inevitable end has become a fixed part of the modern Western imagination. Through a series of biographical portraits spanning the 19th and 20th centuries, the author traces the roots of declinism and aims to show how major thinkers of the past and present, including Nietzsche, DuBois, Sartre, and Foucault, have contributed to its development as a coherent ideology of cultural pessimism.

.com In this ambitious and eminently relevant work of popular intellectual history, Arthur Herman, the coordinator of the Western civilization program at the Smithsonian Institution, makes a broad survey of the literature of cultural decline and a scatter-shot retort to the purveyors of doom and gloom. Herman attempts to right the balance upset by panicky prognosticators who either decry the defeat of Western values or herald the bankruptcy of Enlightenment idealism, despite the unparalleled worldwide ascendance of market economics, universal human rights, and representational, constitutional government. Herman is at his best when making erudite replies to today's ill-informed peddlers of doom and gloom. But when he starts attempting to trace the history of "declinism," to philosophers from Frederick Neitzche to Martin Heidegger, and writers from Henry Adams to Robert Bly, his accusations often fall wide of the intended mark. His assaults on Jean Jacques Rousseau and W.E.B. DuBois will appear particularly unfair to those familiar with the works of these men, though readers who trust in Herman's abbreviated accounts of their thinking will be unknowingly misled. The "Great Ideas" framework Herman defends in the pages of this book ought to prize the close reading of important texts as much as it seeks to protect a sacrosanct canon or a static notion of prized ideals. Great ideas after all stand up to close attention. Herman's book conveys a confidence in the values of the Western tradition, but in making its argument, it inspires a casual disrespect from the works of other arguably great thinkers and artists based on Herman's swift survey--a dubious achievement and troublesome side effect of this

challenging book. From Library Journal Herman, coordinator of the Western Civilization Program at the Smithsonian, argues, like Gress (above), that despite the West emerging triumphant from the Cold War, intellectuals continue to predict pessimistically the decline of the West as they have since the days of Nietzsche and Spengler. Modern society is always "materialistic, spiritually bankrupt, and devoid of human values. Modern people are always displaced, rootless, psychologically scarred, and isolated from one another." (LJ 2/15/97) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Herman recaps the two-century-long tradition of criticism of Western civilization in this readable piece of intellectual history. He covers two historians most closely identified with predicting decline, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, and also brings forth less famous prognosticators of the doom of the West. Most were, as Herman summarizes their works and ideas, concerned about racial degeneration: few have heard the name Gobineau, a mid-nineteenth-century reactionary, but knowledge of him and similar writers who felt they could identify an Aryan "race," and deplored its alleged vitiation, gives readers one source of Nazi ideas. Shifting gears, Herman devotes a long chapter to the career of W. E. B. DuBois, particularly his embrace of Marxism, apparently as an example of how intellectuals (subsequently, Sartre, Marcuse, and Foucault) used the twentieth century's most common theoretical apparatus for critiquing a decadent West. Ending with multiculturalist and environmentalist ideas and their promoters' somewhat unconscious echoing of nineteenth-century ideas, Herman provides an accessible survey for the serious nonacademic. Gilbert Taylor