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TITLE: WHY WE FELL: DECLINIST WRITING AND THEORIES OF  
IMPERIAL FAILURE IN THE LONGUE DURÉE

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CENTER FOR CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY AT YALE  
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## Why we Fell:

### **Declinist Writing and Theories of Imperial Failure in the *Longue Durée***

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

Why did we select ancient Rome rather than more recent sites of decline (contemporary Japan, nineteenth century Britain or France, seventeenth century Holland) for comparison with the U.S.? Our decision was guided by three factors. First, by comparing the first great empire to both undergo decline and generate a literature of decline with the most recent example—we seek to identify the themes that have endured across the broadest range of temporal and structural forms. In other words, where we can find similarities in the themes employed by both ancient Romans and contemporary Americans to address decline, we can conclude that those approaches

are intrinsic to analyses of decline. Second, by identifying how contemporary theories of decline differ from their ancient antecedents, we can see what modern academic modes of analysis have added to thought about decline and large-scale social change, and which themes have been lost to intellectual debate in the intervening millennia. Finally, our comparison allows us to highlight the particular conceptions that ancient and contemporary intellectuals hold of their purposes in writing about decline, above all their intended audiences and impact.

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

The critical study of decline theories is inherently comparative. Contemporary authors who assert the inevitability of American decline base their arguments on perceived similarities between the causal forces that affect the U.S. today and those that supposedly brought down previous dominant powers. Authors who believe decline can be reversed look to the inhabitants of extinct empires to draw exemplary or cautionary lessons for today's Americans. By contrast, Roman historians generally believed that their empire was unprecedented both in its glory and in its decline. As a result, they saw themselves as engaged in a new intellectual task: chronicling and explicating the unique forces that were ruining the Roman world as they idealized it. Although civilizations collapsed prior to Rome, Roman historiographers gave us the earliest known texts to grapple with the causes and consequences of decline. Sixth and fifth century BC

Greek authors generally rued the loss of morals in their contemporaries but did not construct comprehensive analyses of their city-states' decline, (with the possible exception of Aristotle, who analyzed Sparta's decline mainly through her politics [Cawkwell 1983]).

Our goal is to trace the paths along which decline as an idea about and within Roman and U.S. society gained authority, as well as the intellectual and political commitments that sustained it over time. A core conceptual intervention into the existing scholarship is our argument that theories of decline are embedded in a distinct literature characterized by stylistic modes and intellectual commitments that have a long (indeed, an ancient) genealogy. We call this *declinist writing* and consider it a key category of social narrative. Social narratives – whether focused on individuals, groups, or institutions – are powerful shapers of policy and social identity (Somers & Block 2005; Steinmetz 1992). Through their repetition of tropes and stories about social actors, social narratives harden people's understanding of society and concretize such understandings in political rhetoric and laws. Declinist writing is a crucial intermediary in the relationship between popular concerns about social change and vested ideological and political interests that stand to benefit from presenting particular modes of social change as “decline.”

The authors we studied drew on the intellectual tools of their disciplines and eras to build their narratives. As a result their texts offer rich diversity in style, substance, and technique. We begin by identifying the ancient and modern authors who will be the subjects of our analysis, presenting the criteria we used to select them and explaining the methods we used to analyze and compare the texts. We then discuss the main elements of the ancient authors' arguments, followed by a section on the modern authors. Throughout, we group declinist authors according to the factors they emphasize and how they build causal analyses of decline. We specify which ancient authors anticipated elements of modern arguments, which modern authors evoke ancient

tropes, and identify the sorts of analyses that are exclusively modern. We also pay attention to rhetorical styles and see how they serve to focus, and at times undermine, their authors' assertions.

## **AUTHOR SELECTION AND METHOD OF TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

*Longue durée* analyses have made a comeback among historians and sociologists, reviving an approach that was once seen as critical to understanding the development of societies and ideas (Armitage 2012). Historians engage in such extremely long-term history from, as Jerrold Seigel puts it in his study of *The Idea of Self*, a “sense that some important and revealing questions about selfhood and its history can be illuminated by focusing on what is at stake in such disputes” (2005, p. 5). By presenting the various ways in which authors have thought about “the question of selfhood” since the seventeenth century, Seigel sees himself as engaged in “a historical hermeneutic...an aid to understanding and interpreting the legacy of thinking about the self” (p. 17). In so doing he is able to clarify what is new, and what derived from past conceptions, in each author's work. Seigel is mainly concerned with different logical possibilities, and with explaining why certain views of self became dominant at particular historical moments. Similarly, Darrin McMahon (2006), in his study of the conception of happiness from ancient Greece to the present, focuses on identifying turning points in Western thought over those millennia. He attends to the ways in which new conceptions shaped later modes of thought and behavior.

Our study, like those of Siegel and McMahon, is concerned with identifying different ways in which a single concept, decline, can be analyzed and deployed. However, we differ from both Seigel and McMahon in giving as much weight to authors' political and professional

identities as to their temporal locations in explaining the ways in which they draw upon and revise past conceptions of decline. In so doing, and in skipping over two thousand years of history to draw comparisons with the declinist authors most distant from contemporary Americans, we seek to identify the elements inherent to declinist writing as well as those elements that are produced by the authors' temporal and social locations.

Our approach reveals “decline” to be a mutable yet powerful concept that is easily attached to controversial social or political changes and which, in its varying formulations, can be mobilized to support different moral, political and intellectual stances. The force of decline as a concept and mode of analysis derives in large part from the long history of this form of literature. Although the pre-modern past is no longer a core source of cases and analytic categories for theorizing contemporary society, Rome remains a significant trope in contemporary works on American decline (Murphy 2007). If we want to understand what contemporary decline theorists are fighting about and why, we need to identify the themes and modes of analysis they draw upon, and the elements they leave out of their studies. To do so we need a broader perspective on the idea of decline as an enduring social phenomenon.

#### *Modern texts*

Our analysis centers on academic authors. This biases our analysis in the direction of texts that highlight social forces rather than human agency and morality, and are therefore more likely to see decline as inevitable rather than reversible. In other words, we chose our American cases to be as far removed from ancient analytical approaches as possible. Any continuity that we find between them and the ancients will point to enduring themes across the millennia rather than the particularities of whichever modern authors we select.

We focus on six academic authors: Jeffrey Sachs, an economist and political liberal; Niall Ferguson, a historian who positions himself on the right in U.S. politics; Paul Kennedy, also a historian, who wrote one of the earliest and still the most prominent work predicting that the U.S. would decline; and Immanuel Wallenstein, Giovanni Arrighi and Michael Mann, sociologists who are left-leaning politically.

Jeffrey Sachs served as economic policy advisor to several governments. He became famous for advocating “shock therapy” for Latin America in the 1980s and encouraging rapid privatization in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe after 1989. His *The Price of Civilization: Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity* (2011) presents Sachs’s economic analyses and policy prescriptions in a form accessible to a mass audience. Niall Ferguson, author of *Colossus: the Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004), is an academic historian who also has served as a host of television specials and written for popular magazines. He combines references to historical scholarship with positions on contemporary political events and debates while offering sharp comments on individual politicians past and present. *Colossus* was written to influence public debates in the United States. Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* was published in 1987 and did not anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union a mere four years later. Written to address both scholarly and popular audiences, Kennedy draws explicit comparisons between the contemporary U.S. and European great powers from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

Finally, we examine what we consider the most sophisticated sociological treatments of American decline, those of Michael Mann and the two leading world systems scholars, Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi. These three authors, along with Kennedy, stand apart from Sachs and Ferguson in that they explicitly address problems of historical comparison,

analysis of evidence, and theory building. Each of the three seeks to construct a general social scientific theory to explain the problem of U.S. decline. Mann does so in *Incoherent Empire* (2003) and volume four of *The Sources of Social Power* (2013), both of which draw on his model of four types of power to address the strengths and limits of U.S. power in the aftermath of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Wallerstein's *The Decline of American Power* (2003) and *Alternatives: the United States Confronts the World* (2004) both are collections of essays written between 1999 and 2004. Arrighi's *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007) and Mann's *The Sources of Social Power* are directed at an academic audience, while *Incoherent Empire* and Wallerstein's books attempt to address a broader educated public. This is evidenced in Arrighi's direct use of world systems theory and Mann's comparison of his model of power with rival theories in *The Sources of Social Power*, while the Mann of *Incoherent Empire* and Wallerstein leave their models largely implicit and eschew debates with fellow academics in an effort to write more accessible works. These books were written at somewhat different moments: *Incoherent Empire* addresses the Afghan but not Iraq war, *The Decline of American Power* was written in the early, seemingly successful days of the Iraq invasion, while Arrighi and the Mann of *The Sources of Social Power* wrote when the Iraq war had become bogged down by the insurgency. Only *The Sources of Social Power* postdates and addresses the Great Recession that began in 2008.

We do not examine works by policy specialists such as Joseph Nye Jr. (2004), who served as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration as well as Dean of the Kennedy School at Harvard. Nye and authors who explicitly address policymakers are concerned mainly with presenting proposals they believe would be effective in reversing decline and/or ensuring U.S. predominance and that could be enacted within the constraints of current



American politics. As a result, they do not provide sustained analysis of whether decline is irreversible nor are they concerned with constructing explanations that could be generalized over time or across cases.

### *Ancient texts*

From antiquity, we selected three main texts: Sallust's *Catiline Conspiracy*, Ammianus Marcellinus's *Res Gestae*, and Zosimus's *Historia Nova*. Two Roman thinkers who wrote about decline are notably absent from this list: Tacitus and Livy. In his *Annales* Tacitus argued that Rome's political deterioration began with the ascent of Tiberius, the immediate successor of Augustus. Tacitus's method was to recount and analyze the emperors' moral shortcomings to support his thesis that the empire was inherently morally corrupt. Tacitus's theory of social change and imperial corruption is the subject of an extensive literature, which we cannot discuss in detail here. We excluded Tacitus from our sample because we selected only declinist authors who perceived decline to be ongoing and contemporaneous. Tacitus, by contrast, located the acute phases of decline prior to his time.

A case could be made for our including Livy. Livy was a late first century BC/early first century AD Roman who wrote a history of Rome from its founding in 753 BC. Livy tightly links the strength of a state with its citizenry's morality. Morality is a trope that recurs in decline theories and we will enlist Livy as a complementary text to that discussion. But we chose to bracket out Livy from the list of main texts because he focused on a period centuries earlier than the era all other authors agree was when Rome's decline occurred.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Two further exclusions merit explanation. We excluded Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the most famous work ever written on Rome's decline, because we confine our analysis to contemporary rather than retrospective accounts of Roman decline. We also chose not to use Polybius as a key text, even though he is often cited as an early decline theorist. Polybius's project was to explain Rome's exceptionalism

The sample imbalance (three ancient versus six contemporary texts) is explained in part by the relative paucity of surviving works from antiquity. Moreover, although decline was a general theme that ran throughout ancient literature, we prioritized texts in which decline was systematically associated with events, processes, or social structures.

The ideological divisions that organize our set of modern authors do not map easily onto our ancient sample. Rather than dividing the earlier authors as liberal or conservative, it is more helpful to understand them as early or late declinists. Sallust belongs in the early group, Ammianus and Zosimus in the late group. Sallust was one of the first Roman writers to tackle the issue of social and state decline. His *Conspiracy of Catiline* survives in full. We chose this work over his *War with Jugurtha* because of our interest in 1<sup>st</sup> century BC events. In *Catiline* Sallust uses eyewitness accounts and secondary texts to trace a long decline in morals and civic functioning.

By Ammianus's time, the landscape had changed drastically. Important bureaucratic functions were now headquartered in the German city of Trier. Without an imperial court or a bishop (yet) at Rome, a cultural power vacuum was created which senators and their families energetically filled by trying to re-create classical Roman senatorial grandeur (Chenault 2012). We chose to include Ammianus because his *Res Gestae*, composed in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, features a well-developed theory on why Rome's authority eroded. In it, he covers the years AD 353 to 378. Several books of Ammianus's history are missing, but those that survive tell us much about how the author thought about decline. He relied on primary and secondary written works, as well as eyewitness reports and his own experiences in the Roman army to make sense of political, economic, and cultural changes around him.

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to a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Greek readership (Eckstein 1995). He had a well-developed theory of what led to Rome's rise, but did not focus on Rome's decline.

Zosimus was a bureaucrat in Constantinople and wrote his history a century after Ammianus. In his *Historia Nova*, written in the first two decades of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, he attempted to cover the period early 3<sup>rd</sup> to early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. His objective was to explain Rome's decline and fall as an outcome of shifting allegiance from the ancestral, pagan gods to the Christian god. A lifelong resident of the eastern capital of the empire, he wrote his history in Greek and intended it for Greek-speakers. By his time, the Western Roman Empire had unraveled and was used by Zosimus as a warning to his fellow Easterners.

### *Methods for Analyzing the Texts*

We are concerned with identifying the ways in which ancient and contemporary authors construct their narratives of decline. We examine how they structure their arguments, the characters (individuals, groups, peoples, institutions, or impersonal social, moral and cosmic forces) they identify as agents of decline or renewal, and the language they deploy in their texts. We employed an inductive, two-step analysis process to identify how the authors' structures, characters and language came together into coherent (if often conflicting) themes. We read the works, identified a list of themes, and then went through the texts again to see which of those themes appeared in each work and how the authors employed those themes to do the work of explanation and moralizing.

We found ten themes that recurred across the ancient and modern works: *Morals, Self-sacrifice, Social cohesion, Structure, Long-term versus short-term thinking, Rise of rival powers, Foolish military venture that undermines illusion of power, Nostalgia, Comparisons to past great powers, and Proposals to reverse decline*

These ten themes do different work for the authors. Seven of them can be thought of as explanatory variables: *Morals*, *Self-sacrifice*, *Social cohesion*, *Structure*, *Foolish military venture that undermines illusion of power*, *Long-term versus short-term thinking* and *Rise of rival powers*. In other words, these themes were deployed to explain as well as illustrate decline. They were not uniformly used to assign blame or express causation. *Self-sacrifice* recurs in both ancient and modern texts when the authors discuss citizens' disinclination to serve the state through public office, higher taxes, or military conscription. Sometimes these behaviors are correlated with decline rather than blamed for it.

*Morals* is a theme of fundamental importance to the ancient authors, who clearly believed that the deeds and acts of leaders or of ordinary people in groups had potential to determine the health of the state and so used moral shortcomings as a catch-all category for individuals' and institutions' shortcomings. It is of less importance to modern authors, and we kept it separate from *Self-sacrifice* despite their potential thematic overlap because modern authors are typically less willing to describe disinclination towards public service as a vice. *Social cohesion* refers to arguments that identify increasing inequality or conflict among social groups as a cause of decline. *Rise of rival powers* includes references to non-Roman or non-American states or forces with competitive economic, military, or political structures. Again, the authors in our sample are not uniform in citing rival powers as a cause or a consequence of decline. *Structure* includes impersonal social forces and institutional structures that authors contend cause or contribute to decline. *Long-term versus short-term thinking* refers to Romans' or Americans' willingness to grab for short-term benefits at the cost of long-term stability.

Three of the themes do no explanatory work. Instead, we understood them as themes that characterize modes of thinking. *Nostalgia* is the author's longing for a better, past period. It does

not deal with causation or correlates, but can signal a particular ideological agenda. *Comparisons to past great powers* point to a particular mode of argument in which authors argue that their society and its decline is not unique and that analytic or policy lessons can be drawn from previous great powers that declined. *Proposals to reverse decline* indicates whether the author proposed reforms and therefore believes the decline is reversible. We were especially concerned with seeing how the themes cohered to allow the authors to express their views on the moral and structural causes of decline and on its inevitability. This underpins one of our key findings: that the authors in our sample are split between theorizing decline as inevitable or reversible, not along lines of ancient versus modern but along modes of analyzing socio-political structures and processes.

### ***LONGUE DUREE* COMPARISON AND ITS CHALLENGES**

Given the differences in chronology, events covered, and ideological agendas of the modern and ancient authors in our sample, an important question arises: Does “decline” mean the same thing through time? In a word: no. Contestations over the meaning, causes, and correlates of decline permeate our sample. Our authors struggle with each other not only over the reasons for decline but also over its actuality. Where Zosimus and Immanuel Wallerstein see their subjects (Rome; the U.S.) in terminal decline, Ammianus and Michael Mann acknowledge their subjects’ structural weaknesses but stress that they are in transition rather than on track to fall. Differing perspectives are not simply a product of intellectual commitments, an important topic that we discuss later in the paper. They also stem from temporal contexts. Ancient and contemporary writers were not working in the same intellectual environments.

*Theorizing in western antiquity*

Ancient Rome featured a complex intellectual world infused with a wide range of values, languages, ideas, and rhetorical traditions (Rawson 1995). Even as historians built their texts on earlier historical works, they amalgamated new sources into their narratives and enriched them with anecdotes from contemporary eyewitnesses. Roman historians cannot, however, be said to have engaged in systematic theoretical accounts of the Republic's (and then Empire's) rise and decline (Kapust 2011). Modern-day theorists attempt to isolate the core features of a process and then reassemble them into an explanation of why it happened, how it may recur in the future, and what generalizable principles can be drawn from them. In so doing they present institutions and social forces in such a way that they no longer seem inevitable or logical. Roman historians wrote for fellow Romans, and could therefore take for granted that their own political institutions did not need to be deconstructed or explained.

Above all, Roman thinkers were not concerned with generalizable principles that could explain socio-political phenomena writ large (Hammer 2008). What they did instead was offer accounts of Roman history that involved both critique and a positive normative component (Potter 1999). Their aim was to produce useful history – useful not in the sense of providing a framework for understanding social change or political patterns, but in producing a set of inspiring models to guide future leaders' decision-making (Wiedemann 2008: 521-522). Roman thinkers built their arguments on concrete examples, drawn chiefly from Rome's past or present. This differs from the approach of many modern theorists who broaden the scope of their inquiry beyond the familiar or local. But the *exemplum* tradition painted Roman historians into an epistemological corner. In order that the examples of past leaders, whether positive or negative, could be relevant for later generations of readers they had to play down the significance of

changes in political structures over time (Wiedemann 2008: 520). This helps explain why the category of morals factors more prominently in ancient decline texts than does the category of structure.

Our contemporary distinction between “the past” as an aggregate of events and people, as distinct from the aggregate of events and people that will comprise “the future,” was unknown to the Romans. To them, the past was not the total aggregate but the selective retelling of famous achievements of men and noteworthy events of states. The future could not be forecast on this basis: the loss of imperial territory or the sacking of the capital was dependent on the (unpredictable) arrival of charismatic generals or bad emperors, not on long-term processes.

Another major difference from modern historical thought was the lack of delineation between “objective” and “subjective” history writing (see Daston & Galison 2010 on the history of objectivity more generally). Contemporary scholars generally refrain from character slurs and critiques of leaders’ private lives to explain what happened in the past and why. Ancient writers and their audiences, on the other hand, understood that the vices, virtues, and deeds of individuals made a real difference in the course of events, and that was why they could factor prominently in narratives of decline without risk of the author appearing biased. As Charles Fornara (1983) argued in his classic study of Greek and Roman approaches to writing about history, “‘History’ is an abstract word to moderns [...]; to ancients, the notion was concrete even before the word *historia* came to designate it.” History, in other words, was conceptualized as the retelling of actual accomplishments (*res gestae*) and events – things that happened and still matter. It was, as a rule, not about processes and structures that could be isolated from an empirical setting.

**ANCIENT DECLINIST THOUGHT: DECLINE AS A MORAL PROBLEM**

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*Moral crisis and the decline of Rome*

Morals are central to the ancient narratives of decline. Roman intellectuals understood the strength of the state to be inextricably linked with the stability of the social. This is because the *res publica* existed within and was constituted by the values and behaviors of the community. Men, morals, and the common good were solidly linked. From this theoretical standpoint, the gradual ineffectiveness of governing institutions and state officials has to be seen as a byproduct of moral decay located in the people. Moral decay exacerbated the weaknesses of the state, leading to a mutually reinforcing, destructive relationship. This is the exemplary historical tradition in action. As discussed above, Roman historians had explicitly moral purposes in writing their texts, including the project of assigning blame or credit to individuals who displayed virtue or vice (Chaplin 2000).

This basic idea persisted through at least five centuries, surviving the transition from Republic to Empire. There were, however, new discursive priorities in the later period. For Sallust the pressing historical problem was the decline of Republican politics in Rome and the rise of one-man rule. He saw decline manifested in increased corruption among the ruling elites, reduced devotion to the common good, and a turning away of past ethical practices within the general population. For Ammianus and Zosimus, the social changes in urgent need of explanation were the survival of the Roman Senate, the dominance of Christianity, and the German barbarians (Momigliano 1977). In spite of the new contingencies, later writers on Roman decline retained the focus on ethical frameworks. For them, as for Sallust, the fortunes of the state depended on the moral behavior of its members.

Sallust identified 146 BC as the point when Rome began to decline (*Cat.* 10, 1). It was in that year that the Roman army crushed the Carthaginians. With the obliteration of the great



nemesis, Sallust argued, Romans lost the healthy sense of fear that had kept them constantly vigilant (*metus hostilis*) (Conley 1981). Since, in Sallust's view, the primary function of the state was to wage war (Wood 1995), the erosion of *metus hostilis* stripped the Republic of its virility. Sallust named two vices that were ruining Rome: excessive ambition and avarice (*ambitio*, *avaritia*) (*Cat.* 11). Ambition was fine so long as it was in the interest of the common good. After Carthage, wrote Sallust, individuals' ambitions were directed to their own interests rather than to the *res publica*. The patricians set the example for the people, among whom public morals or *civitatis mores* were concretized and sustained. But the patricians proved a problematic moral model: Sallust blames them for spreading poor morals through the *civitas* like a "pestilence" (*Cat.* 10). By linking widespread personal corruption with the hampering (and eventual breakdown) of civic functions, Sallust constructs a structural argument that is based on morals.

In early Rome, Sallust argues, the social body's morals were at their best (*concordia maxuma, minuma avaritia erat*) (*Cat.* 9.1). Moreover, the production of positive morals (*boni mores*) was a communal project. It was, at that time, not necessary to enforce them through law because it was in the nature of the Roman people to be good and so encourage each other to behave well (*Cat.* 9.1-2). But as the fledgling republic grew and increased in authority and fortune, individuals were enticed to make poor moral choices (McGushin 1992: 82-83). The accretion of wealth that began after 146 BC hastened the demise of the *res publica*. Lust for money and power destroyed the noble qualities on which the Republic had been founded (*Cat.* 9.3-5). Personal vices poisoned the public well of trust and the citizenry and its leaders were distracted from running the Republic. Carthage was the first swing of the ax; the people's corruption brought down the formerly sturdy Republican oak.

Sallust's extensive treatment of the *civitas mores* offered a mode of analyzing the state's stability as dependent on social change. The growing acceptance of young men's refusal to serve in the Roman army, for example, signaled a new attitude towards self-sacrifice that had direct bearing on the health of the state. This attitude was made possible because of elites' coalescence around a set of radical ideas about what constitutes good individual choices (accumulating financial resources rather than embracing austerity; pursuing private professional and educational passions rather than taking on civic duties inherited through one's family). "The young" comprised their own social category and destabilized state structure through their selfish behavior (*Cat.* 17.6; 43.2). Social cohesion could be positive in reinforcing good moral choices, or negative in supporting bad ones.

The themes of morals and self-sacrifice continued to configure prominently in the writings of later Roman thinkers. In shifting from Sallust to Ammianus (AD 330-390) we move forward nearly 400 years, a crucial period of transformation (Potter 2006). The Roman Empire reached the peak of its power and geographical expanse in the mid-second century AD. By Ammianus's time more than a century of leadership crises and internecine fighting had drastically altered the field of power in the western half of the Empire. Ammianus served in the army of the emperor Julian during the expedition against Persia (*Amm.* 23, 5.7; 24, 1.5). Julian was killed and the Roman army surrendered. This was stark evidence of how low Rome's fortunes had sunk. Ammianus confronted famine at Rome (14.6.19), mutinies, and massacres of Roman civilians in the provinces: "Everything was consumed in an orgy of killing and burning that paid no regard to age or sex. Infants were snatched from the very breast and put to death, mothers ravished, and married women widowed by seeing their husbands killed [...]" (*Amm.* 31.6.7).

Ammianus perceived bad morals as a contagion that could spread throughout the body of the state, an echo of Sallust's theory. There were structural factors in this, too, according to Ammianus. The selection of corrupt administrators by the emperors Constantine and Constantius effectively sanctioned their vices and worsened an already bad situation (Amm. 16.8.13). Fourth-century emperors' unwillingness to endure hardships or risk death in the interest of Empire made their subjects equally unwilling to do so, reducing the pool of people willing to sacrifice themselves for the state whether through war or civil service (Amm. 31.14.2). In Ammianus's view social cohesion was fragmentary. He was more optimistic and less prone to generalizations than Sallust, who condemned a single, primarily elite cohesion for the spread of corruption. Ammianus recognized positive cohesion in specific social contexts, for example among Roman soldiers who fought bravely even in the face of insurmountable odds (Amm. 31.13).

In spite of the challenges confronted by the imperial administration and the people of Rome, Ammianus did not believe that the Empire faced total collapse. Recounting the devastating losses inflicted on Roman soldiers and the Italian peoples by northern barbarians, Ammianus remained optimistic: "[...] after these calamitous losses the situation was restored. This was because our old, sober morality had not yet been undermined by the temptations of a laxer and more effeminate way of life [...] High and low alike were of one mind, and eager to meet a glorious death for their country as if it were a peaceful and quiet haven" (Amm. 31.5.12-17). This recovery pre-dates Ammianus's time and could be construed as a piece of nostalgia in action, but the author is clear that the fundamental qualities that made Rome great are still there. The strength of Rome, and its continued existence as an empire, depended on a combination of structural (low taxation, competent judiciary, stable military leaders) and moral (fair behavior,

honesty) factors (Momigliano 1977: 135). A succession of rotten emperors could not change that formula.

Ammianus's narrative stops before the city of Rome was sacked in AD 390. Zosimus lived through the gritty aftermath of several sacks of the city. He, too, blamed Rome's decline on moral crisis. Zosimus recognized the power of social cohesion, too, but as an instrument of discontent. He argued that the endless suffering of the people under cruel emperors led to constant incursions and revolts, made possible by collective anger (*Zos.* 4.2). This collective anger also led to anarchy (*Zos.* 4.14) and secession (5.5-6), which further weakened the state.

Sallust worried about slipping moral standards in a political context in which, ironically, Rome was approaching her most powerful phase. But Ammianus and Zosimus could look around them and see the political and physical deterioration of Rome and the slaughter of its residents by bands of foreign fighters. This accounts for why they incorporate into their narratives serious discussion of the rise of rival powers. At this point we can make a preliminary characterization of decline theory as a chain of tropes (morality, corruption, or turning points) rather than a set of maps, tables, or figures that objectively and decisively present the state of affairs. We now return to our modern texts to test whether they sustain this characterization of decline theory.

## **MORALS, STRUCTURES, AND PRESCRIPTIONS FOR RECOVERY IN MODERN DECLINIST NARRATIVES**

Compared with ancient authors, modern declinist authors have less to say about the role of morality in state strength. They identify three sorts of moral failings as sources of American decline: greed and selfishness among elites, failures among the entire population to assume the burdens of world leadership, and arrogance and racism toward non-Americans. Some authors

find a combination of these vices among Americans. The first two factors encompass aspects of both our morals and self-sacrifice themes. What all the authors who focus on these factors share is the contention that these factors are voluntaristic and potentially could be reversed, thereby mitigating American decline.

*Morals in modern decline narratives*

Mann and Sachs both point to greed on the part of elites as a factor in U.S. decline, although they differ in the extent to which they identify actual individuals or groups within the elite, and in the share of the blame for the nation's moral decline they assign to the elite. Sachs devotes more attention to the immoral actions of the rich than any other author we examined. At the outset of his book he states: "Wall Street didn't just gamble away other people's money. Wall Street banks broke the law, repeatedly and aggressively [...]" (p. xv). Sachs's first chapter, "Diagnosing America's Economic Crisis," begins: "At the root of America's economic crisis lies a moral crisis: the decline of civic virtue among America's political and economic elite" (p. 3). The members of this elite "have abandoned a commitment to social responsibility. They chase wealth and power, the rest of society be damned" (p. 5). Sachs juxtaposes corruption, dishonesty and self-dealing on the part of politicians and the rich with "globalization, and specific regulatory and tax policy choices... [that] have combined to create an inequality of income and wealth unprecedented in American history" (p. 22).

Sachs does not suggest a causal relationship between inequality and corruption. "It's hard to know the ultimate cause of the breakdown in corporate truth telling and ethical business behavior in general," he asserts. "Dishonesty is a contagious social disease; once it gets started, it tends to spread" (p. 23). Similarly, Michael Mann identifies several "major corporations" and

“major accountancy firms” by name as perpetrators of financial fraud. However, Mann argues “this is a structural problem, not just a problem of a few criminals, since it results from the dominance of finance over productive capitalism in the U.S.” (2003, p. 51). Mann also points to the weakness of American democracy, specifically that, “Most members of Congress have to raise over a million dollars from business interests to get elected” as the cause of “inequality [that] widens to a degree unparalleled anywhere in the world” (2003, p. 100). In *The Sources of Social Power, volume 4* Mann shows how greed combined with, and was intensified by, structural factors to bring on what he calls the Great Neoliberal Recession in 2008. In that volume he also explains how extreme inequality has made the US economy more turbulent and prone to crisis and less competitive internationally.

Mann and Wallerstein focus more attention on U.S. behavior in the international realm than in the domestic arena. Mann and Wallerstein criticize Americans’ arrogance. Wallerstein notes that American leaders state, and the public believes, that the U.S. is both better off materially and more virtuous than any other country in the world. Wallerstein sees such statements as grating on people elsewhere in the world, but does not draw out any implications of that for America’s ability to dominate other countries or for its leaders’ and public’s ability to think through the actual choices facing the country in its foreign policy.

Mann notes, “Like all imperialists, American ones are self-righteous” (2003, p. 100). He does not specify which Americans are imperialist. He excoriates political leaders for arrogance in their assertions that the U.S. is a unique font of virtues such as democracy and liberty, and compares American journalists unfavorably to their European counterparts for failing to confront their political leaders on their hypocrisy and deceit. The general public goes along with imperialism, in Mann’s analysis, from ignorance about the world and lack of criticism of

governmental foreign policy in the media. The American public suffers from “ethnocentrism” in their belief that attacks on the U.S. stem from “deep cultural resentments of us” rather than “grievances caused by our aggression” (2003, p. 162). The general public is merely ignorant, while journalists, intelligence agencies, and politicians deliberately ignore clear evidence that bin Laden and other terrorists expressed “political grievances [and] barely said a word about Western culture” (2003, p. 169).

Wallerstein offers a similar analysis. He argues that Americans see themselves as citizens of “the greatest country in the world” (2003, p. 195), as “more civilized than the rest of the world” (p. 198). These beliefs, combined with the U.S.’s success in maintaining global hegemony in the decades following World War II was “blinding” (2003, p. 203). Yet, for Wallerstein, what the U.S. is blind to is not the steps they must take to maintain or reassert hegemony, but rather to the need “to learn to live with the new reality—that it no longer has the power to decide unilaterally what is good for everyone. It may not even be in a position to decide unilaterally what is good for itself. It has to come to terms with the world” (2003, p. 213). What those terms are, and how the U.S. can meet them, Wallerstein does not explain.

Ferguson, unlike Wallerstein and Mann, believes that the U.S. is genuinely a force for good in the world, and that imperialism in fact is in the service of people throughout the world and not just for Americans’ particular interests. Ferguson worries that Americans are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain that world dominance and contends that America suffers from an “attention deficit” (p. 293 and *passim*), an unwillingness to sustain the financial and human costs of an international empire. He argues that the attention deficit is “systemic” due to frequent elections and the division of power among branches of the Federal government and between the national, state and local levels. Thus, Ferguson blames the structure of American

politics and government rather than the public at large. He notes, however, that graduates of elite universities are not willing to devote their lives to careers in the Foreign Service or military.

“Unlike their British counterparts of a century ago, who left elite British universities with an overtly imperial ethos, the letters most ambitious young Americans would like to see after their names are CEO, not CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire)” (p. 204). Ferguson does not explain why this is, nor does he link the pursuit of wealth to other social changes.

Kennedy, meanwhile, has little say about American morals. He notes in passing that the U.S. lost in Vietnam because Americans (and South Vietnamese) were less willing to sacrifice for victory than were the communists (p. 406), and worries that the economic decline he predicts will create a backlash among poorer Americans and lead to demands for higher taxes on the rich and greater social spending that will further sap long-term economic growth and/or limit military spending (p. 531).

*Structural causes and the reversibility of decline in modern declinist thought*

Modern authors look beyond the moral failings of individual leaders, groups, generations and entire societies to also examine structural factors: the operation of domestic and world economies, the organization of government, the rise of rival powers, and past decisions that create path dependencies (although they generally do not use that term) limiting the choices and initiatives of actors in dominant powers in later years. The focus on social structure, combined with their willingness to acknowledge that human actions are not entirely matters of choice and willpower, distinguish the modern authors from the ancients. Whether and how the author proposes to fix America’s decline is connected to whether he sees decline as a matter of choice. In constructing their narratives about the inevitability or reversibility of U.S. decline, these authors build causal arguments that combine some or all of the themes: *Structure*, *Social*



*cohesion, Rise of rival powers, and Foolish military ventures that undermine the illusion of power.*

The modern authors diverge in terms of their emphasis on choice and structure: Sachs and Ferguson are voluntaristic, while Kennedy and the three sociologists— Wallerstein, Arrighi and Mann – offer almost exclusively structural explanations. Sachs points to globalization as a key cause of American decline. However, he identifies additional structural factors: “inflation at the end of the 1960s...the collapse of the post-World War II global exchange-rate system in 1971” and the oil shocks of 1973-74 and 1979-80 (p. 54). Reagan’s interpretation of those events as consequences of too large and intrusive governmental social programs created a new “political reality [...] government had lost its aura of competency. Probably this alone was fatal to the economic consensus that had guided the country for almost forty years” (p. 55). In addition, backlashes against feminism, “the countercultural movement of the 1960s...the civil rights movement [and] Hispanic immigration” combined with “the demographic and economic rise of the Sunbelt [and] suburbanization” to further undermine the structural and political bases for the governmental policies and investments needed to maintain “a healthy economy” and “chart a course through the twists and turns of globalization” (p. 105). The effects of these forces have been exacerbated by the capacity of corporations and wealthy individuals to manipulate politics to their interests. They have been exacerbated, too, by the lack of political involvement by a public that is increasingly distracted by television viewing and long work hours necessary to maintain their level of consumption amid falling incomes. Despite his extended analysis of structural forces that have changed U.S. political economy, Sachs concludes by arguing that Americans can transform their politics and recapture global leadership by making different decisions about their lives and their nation’s government.

Sachs believes that the structural impediments to America's revival can be surmounted if "the federal government adopt[s] Seven Habits of Highly Effective Government" (p. 238). He contends that change starts with the individual: "to pull back from hypercommercialism, unplug from the noisy media a bit, and learn more about and reflect on the current economic situation" (p. 254). Sachs hopes "the Millennials [who] are children of the Internet" (p. 252) will be different from "the boomers...the children of TV" (*Ibid.*). As a result, Sachs takes an ambiguous position toward the loss of social cohesion. As we saw in the previous section, Sachs attributes inequality to Reagan's policies as well as globalization. Yet, he believes social cohesion can be restored, even if inequality is not significantly reduced, through individual and national choices.

The other modern authors have less to say about social cohesion. Mann mentions the rise in inequality in passing (2003, p. 100, as does Kennedy, as we noted above) and addresses it in more detail in *The Sources of Social Power, volume 4*, where he notes that "at the very end of the twentieth century the United States became for the first time exceptional. It became more unequal but less bothered by this." (2013, p. 343). However, Mann does not address this shift in moral terms. He sees the rich as taking advantage of new structural openings, and sees working class voters who support Reagan and Bush as blinded by ideology (including racism) to their own self-interest, but does not propose steps for reversing such beliefs, as opposed to his calls in both books for voters to adopt more enlightened positions on global issues. Arrighi notes that Hurricane Katrina "revealed...a country that is not a country at all, but atomized, segmented individuals" (p. 264). For both Arrighi and Wallerstein hegemonic decline inevitably brings growing inequality with it, as part of the structural dynamics of the world system.

Ferguson argues that the structure of American government—frequent elections and the division of powers among levels and branches of government—magnify Americans' moral

failings. Politicians, to further their political careers, need to continue social spending, even though that increases deficits and starves the military of funding. Politicians also had to respect the public's unwillingness "to wage prolonged conventional wars to defeat" Communism. Opposition to sustained foreign intervention deepened in the years after the Cold War and "the credibility of American pledges 'to support any friend [and] oppose any foe' rapidly waned" (p. 87).

Ferguson believes that structural factors matter less than Americans' moral failings, and on this basis he offers suggestions for how the U.S. can reassert dominance. He calls for America to develop the "guts" and "grit" "to play the role of liberal empire" (p. 301). That can be done if Americans invest the manpower and money needed over the very long-term to sustain foreign interventions. He believes the U.S. is rich enough to do so, and advocates paying for empire by cutting social benefits rather than increasing taxes. Kennedy, in contrast, sees the factors that he identifies as sources of U.S. geo-political sclerosis—inter-service rivalries, divisions between the Defense and State Departments, frequent elections, the power of lobbyists, profiteering by defense contractors—as structural rather than moral and therefore unlikely to change. Regardless, Kennedy argues that all great powers are subject to challenge from rising powers and inevitably suffer from "imperial overstretch" as expanding foreign commitments require expensive military expenditures.

Wallerstein, Arrighi and Mann, like Kennedy, attribute American decline to inexorable structural forces rather than changes in American morals and desires. Wallerstein and Arrighi, who work within (indeed they are the founders of) world systems analysis, see American decline as just the latest phase in the recurring cycle of hegemonic rise, dominance and decline, and therefore as inevitable and irreversible. Both men compare the U.S. to Britain, and Arrighi to the

Netherlands and Genoa as well, showing similarities in the strategies those hegemons adopted to achieve and maintain dominance, and to the forces that undermined their leadership of the world system.

Mann, who classifies the U.S. as an empire rather than a hegemon in both books, compares America to “the Roman and with recent European Empires, from the massive British to the tiny Belgian Empire” (2003, p. 13). He sees American, and British, decline as contingent, the result of uneven reductions in some but not all of what Mann identifies as the four sources of social power: military, economic, political and ideological. Mann offers a balance sheet of the level of each sort of power available to the U.S. and finds “extremely uneven power resources. These lead not to general collapse but to imperial incoherence and foreign policy failure” (2003, p. 13).

Wallerstein and Arrighi, unlike Ferguson, do not posit differences in Americans’ and Britons’ desires to amass and hold an empire. The world systems authors assume that the rulers of hegemons, and perhaps their citizens as well, are willing to do whatever they can to maintain their privileged position in the world. Cyclic shifts in the global structure, not the loss of the will to dominate and to make the sacrifices necessary to do so, cause the decline of hegemony in Wallerstein and Arrighi’s analyses.

Mann differs from Wallerstein and Arrighi, and is closer to Ferguson, when he argues that Americans are hampered in their desires to maintain empire by their unwillingness to use “exemplary repression [...] It is unlikely American troops or the American electorate could stomach such ferocious orders” (2003, p. 25). This is so because “American kids are not brought up to be as racist, as stoic in combat, as self-denying in crisis, or as obedient to authority, as British kids once were” (2003, p. 27). (We note that, notwithstanding this assertion, Mann

argued in *The Sources of Social Power volume 3* that Americans were more racist than Europeans and this hampered their ability to recruit and use local proxies in their colonies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.) Yet Mann, unlike Ferguson, does not believe Americans' current aversion to inflicting extreme violence on foreigners is reversible (barring an intensified competition for resources brought on by global warming).

The authors differ on whether the outcomes of recent wars have strengthened or weakened America's global dominance. Sachs sees the Afghan and Iraqi occupations as failures, "brought down by ignorance, lack of planning, and corruption of U.S. contractors" (p. 238) but he does not discuss if or how those failures matter for the U.S.'s future. The other authors point to a loss of U.S. credibility as the main consequence of defeats or premature withdrawals. Ferguson focuses on the decisions to end wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Somalia – each of them a plausible victory for the U.S., he contends – and argues that the repeated failure to continue the fight undermined U.S. credibility and exposed Americans as "not willing to die" (p. 14). Arrighi argues that as a result of U.S. defeat in Vietnam, "U.S. military might credibility and the U.S. gold-dollar standard collapsed" (p. 257) but he sees the U.S. defeat in Iraq as worse because "the disparity of forces between the U.S. invaders and the local resistance in Iraq has been incomparably greater than in Vietnam" and so Iraq "constitutes a far greater blow to the credibility of U.S. military than defeat in Indochina" (p. 184). Kennedy, who wrote before the Iraq war, also sees defeat in Vietnam as largely a temporary blow to U.S. prestige abroad, but worries that it would make Americans shy away from future foreign interventions. Wallerstein, who mentions Vietnam as the first instance when America "began to bleed...in terms of finance and lives lost" (2003, p. 49), thought it unlikely the U.S. could prevail in Iraq and predicted that defeat would "transform...a gradual descent into a much more rapid and turbulent decline"

(2003, p. 24). Mann, writing in 2003, foresaw that Iraqi resistance would “tie down many U.S. troops for years with blowback among the neighbors and on the supply of terrorists” (2003, p. 243). Wallerstein, Arrighi and Mann see past U.S. defeats as creating irreversible losses to American credibility, while Ferguson suggests that credibility could be restored at any time if Americans heeded his calls for self-sacrifice and stoicism.

### **YEARNING FOR THE PAST: NOSTALGIA AND PAST POWERS**

In this section we bring the ancient and modern texts together to examine another key aspect of decline narratives: mining the past for examples of better times in an effort to illustrate current decline. Both ancient and modern authors often evoked the themes *Comparisons to past powers* and *Nostalgia* together, although the former category has very different meanings for the ancients and moderns and therefore serves distinct analytic and rhetorical roles for each set of authors. Ancient authors tended to employ nostalgia as a literary trope: Rome is not what it once was, a golden age of brave men and honest officials. Among the modern authors who invoke past powers or reflect sentimentally on earlier periods of American history, they differ in the extent to which they regard American decline as unique and unprecedented or as the latest case of the inevitable decline of all great powers.

Sallust and Ferguson are the most overtly nostalgic of the authors in our sample – the former for early Republican Rome, the latter for imperial Britain. Both men use the earlier cases to illustrate the weaknesses of their current objects of study (late Republican Rome and 21<sup>st</sup> century America, respectively). Both assert decline as a demonstrable reality on the basis of the weaknesses’ accumulation over time. They differ, however, in how they develop the nostalgia discussion to sustain their narrative. As we will see, Sallust was pessimistic about the prospect of

Rome ever returning to its glory days. Ferguson argues that the U.S. has the possibility of regaining its global dominance because it shares certain structural elements with the British Empire at its peak.

Sallust specified three factors in the superiority of the early Republic: men were selflessly devoted to serving the state with mind and body; people showed great self-discipline and piety towards the gods; and individuals subordinated their private financial interests to the pursuit of collective economic security through cooperative work and domestic frugality. These values made the early Republicans Rome's greatest generation: for them, "no labor was unfamiliar, no region too rough or too steep, no armed enemy was dread-inducing (*formidulosus*) [...] each man strove to be the first to strike down the enemy, to scale the wall, to be seen by all to be doing such a deed. This they considered their wealth, their great fame (*bonam famam*) and high nobility" (*Cat.* 7.5-6). These positive practices were abetted by a community system that placed young boys in military training, insisted on regular participation in religious rites and festivals, and referred disputes to the courts.

Sallust argued that it was the superior nature of the early Romans, rather than laws, that kept them good, yet he also specified structural elements that reinforced a broad willingness to sacrifice oneself for the state (*non legibus magis quam natura valebat*, *Cat.* 9.1) The erosion of those structures meant that Sallust's generation could not hope to match the virtues of the early Romans. Essentially, then, nostalgia frames the decline narrative without hope of returning to the glory days.

Ferguson, who believes that America failed to make the sacrifices necessary to maintain the world empire it was handed at the end of World War II, gives no evidence that he is nostalgic for the US in past eras. Instead, his book is a sustained exercise in nostalgia for imperial Britain:

in Ferguson's view it was the British who know how to support an empire that was brought down only by the *deus ex machina* of two world wars rather than internal structural or moral weakness. Nostalgia here frames a pointed comparison of the contemporary U.S. with Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Successful U.S. occupations in Germany and Japan are compared with Britain's foreign occupations (pp. 69-83); U.S. impact abroad is assessed against Britain's creation of liberal world trade and rule of white dominions and India (pp. 186-97); the British occupation of Iraq and Egypt is contrasted with the American occupation of Iraq (chapter 6); and America's soaring debt is compared unfavorably with Britain's past power as global creditor (pp. 279-80, 291-92).

Nostalgia is also a prominent theme in Sachs's narrative. Sachs expresses nostalgia for the World War II and Cold War eras and for the leadership of FDR and JFK. He does not offer comparisons to past powers but instead focuses on the U.S., past, present, and future.

In Zosimus's narrative, the gradual diminishment of Rome's territorial authority is a sure sign of the empire's decline (*Zos.* 4.59.3). He contrasted his own period (early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD) unfavorably with that of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, when even the provinces furthest from Rome were secure: "to this day the Roman emperors have not been able to recover any of them [lost provinces]" (*Zos.* 3.32.6). Zosimus argued that things were better for Rome when the empire was at its greatest geographical expanse because the challenge of managing the territories pushed Rome's military and economic administrators to perform exceptionally well. There was a reciprocal relationship: great leaders of the past built a vast empire, and the vastness of the empire demanded great leaders. That this relationship was not sustained is an analytical puzzle for Zosimus. He attempts to solve it with a set of socio-political factors – wars, resource



constraints, demographic shifts – which a past generation used to meet the challenges of managing a vast empire.

For the voluntarist theorists of decline, some measure of nostalgia is useful as a reminder to their readers of how great things once were. This animates their argument that the greatness can be recaptured with the right policies or structural changes. Kennedy, Wallerstein, Arrighi and Mann, on the other hand, avoid appeals to, or hopes for, the American public to make sacrifices that will sustain or revive U.S. world dominance. All four draw comparisons with past great powers, but do so only to deepen their analysis of structural change without evoking nostalgia or drawing invidious comparisons between Americans' moral qualities and those of earlier empires. Because they see America's decline as having structural causes and therefore inevitable, they do not offer proposals to reverse the fall. Unlike the other authors, the three sociologists see American dominance as having produced global suffering, although Wallerstein finds "American ideals...quite wonderful, even refreshing" (Wallerstein 2003, p. 209) and Mann concedes that Americans want to use military power "to make the world a better place" (Mann 2003, p. 45).

Wallerstein, Arrighi and Mann do discuss ways in which the suffering caused by American loss of hegemony might be mitigated at home and abroad even as they avoid any expression of nostalgia for the era of American dominance. Thus, they discount the role of willpower and desire in stemming decline, but open a space for choice in shaping America's future. Wallerstein mainly discusses strategies the world Left can adopt; however, he also "reserves for us moral choice...the possibility, which is far from a certainty, of a more substantively rational world, of a more egalitarian world, of a more democratic world" (2003, pp. 215-16). Wallerstein does not specify whether "us" is all or part of the American people, nor does he specify mechanisms that will allow "us" to make those choices. Instead, he asserts,

“more Americans than we might suspect [...] are deeply concerned by the moral dilemmas in which the country, and its government, has placed itself. If they saw a positive program on the horizon, many would rally to it” (2004, 149-50).

Mann’s prescription is political action – namely, denying George W. Bush a second term in office as president and avoiding further pointless, destructive wars (2003, pp. 13, 267). Arrighi discusses debates within the American government over what policy to adopt toward China. None of the choices, in Arrighi’s view, can avert U.S. decline or what he, alone among the modern authors we analyze, sees as China’s rise to world dominance. However, some policies will be less costly for the U.S. and less likely to destabilize world geopolitics and thereby risk nuclear war. Kennedy assumes that one or more great powers always will dominate weaker countries and therefore U.S. decline is inevitable. While he mentions the role of “skill and experience” in the last sentence of the book (p. 540), those qualities remain unanalyzed, and Kennedy never proposes reforms that skilled statesmen could employ to slow or prevent American decline.

Reflecting briefly on the ancient texts, nostalgia played a minimal role in Ammianus’s history. He praised the early years of the reign of the emperor Julian (mid-4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), whose highlights included a firm grasp of international relations and relatively uncorrupt imperial staff. But moves pragmatically through the praiseworthy past deeds of the dead emperor to deliver a balanced assessment of what worked or failed in his own era. Similarly, the *Past Great Powers* theme is minimally evident in the ancient texts. Each of the authors mentions a past power as a point of reference but none of these is used to develop a systematic comparison with Rome. Praise for past foreign leaders was not tantamount to an endorsement for adopting the structures or practices of those leaders’ nations. Aeneas, Alexander the Great, and Pericles

were invoked in the tradition of exemplary history, and their greatness was innate rather than socially derived. Given the pervasiveness of the Roman exceptionalist view among Rome's historiographers, it would not have made sense to compare Rome with other nations or empires except to stress her superiority over them.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our analysis sheds light on the nature of decline as a contested historical object and symbol, with efforts by authors from various disciplines to organize social actors and events into categories freighted with moral value. We find the stubborn continuity of particular patterns of thinking through the extremely *longue durée*.

What were the core contributions of the ancient writers to decline narrative? The ancient authors combined a willingness to evaluate and condemn the behavior of their subjects with the fatalistic view that corruption, greed and stupidity were catastrophic. But their logic is not as consistent as we might hope. For Sallust and Zosimus, eroded morality could not be changed by appeals to reason or readers' altruism. Thus, decline was inevitable and fated. For Ammianus and Livy, there was reason for optimism. They conceded decline, yes, but neither can be pinned down as arguing for terminal decline. The ancients wrote their histories to illustrate truths about human behavior and to record rather than alter the fate of the Roman polity. We cannot regard their histories as prescriptive in the sense of a modern policy paper. But what accounts for Sallust's and Zosimus's "hard fall" argument and Ammianus's "soft decline" view is not simply a product of the authors' tempers. What accounts for the discrepancies, we suggest, is their stake in broader political issues.

The ancient authors had varying views of their obligation and capacity to influence public debates in Rome. Their texts were intended for a relatively small, elite readership. Rome was not a democracy, and to be involved in state affairs was not to be positioned to change them. Nevertheless, historians including Tacitus and Suetonius were sufficiently fearful of imperial reprisal that they masked their critiques of the power structure or chose subjects who were long since dead (Ahl 1984). Asserting decline in spoken or written word risked discomfiting the ruling powers. They understood that decline is an idea with problematic potential for discontent or reform.

Modern authors bring two principal innovations to the narratives of decline offered by ancient Romans: structural analysis and proposals for reform. Most of the modern authors we have examined draw explicit comparisons among societies in an effort to identify structural forces that are not idiosyncratic to the United States or the result of bad luck and that can account for decline not only in the U.S. but in other societies. For these authors the U.S. is not unique, but rather one more society subject to the same forces that caused decline elsewhere in the past. The modern authors' other innovation is somewhat at odds with the first. Their proposals for reforms that can forestall or reverse decline suggest that the structural causes they identify are not necessarily inevitable. Thus most of the modern authors' arguments are subject to tensions and inconsistencies between their efforts to be analytical and their desires to play a role in American politics by guiding debates on domestic and foreign policy. Regardless of the sorts of reforms they propose, these modern authors are at odds with both the ancients who see decline as the inevitable result of fate and their own theories which see structural forces as implacable and therefore beyond reform.

The modern authors are often inconsistent, undercutting their structural explanations with proposals and hopes for reforms. Sachs combines structural and voluntaristic explanations for American decline and believes that there is a way to reverse decline if Americans make different decisions based on a more altruistic and self-sacrificing moral code than the one that current guides their decisions. While Sachs unconsciously echoes ancient tropes of generational degradation and decadence, he does not view those faults as fated but as problems that, once recognized, can be remedied through careful planning and willpower.

The three sociologists and Kennedy are the most consistent in avoiding appeals to voluntaristic schemes to reverse decline; however Mann and Wallerstein do contend that Americans have choices and can take steps to mitigate the human suffering that decline will cause within America and especially in the rest of the world. Wallerstein and Arrighi, in presenting American decline as the result of implacable forces, give the operation of a capitalist world system a causal and rhetorical role in their books that parallels the roles given to fate and the gods by Roman authors. Mann, by building his explanation on the complex and contingent interactions of multiple actors wielding four types of power in various institutional settings, avoids the sense that America was propelled toward an inevitable outcome. Mann does not identify a single moment when America's fate turned; instead he identifies multiple chains of contingent events that yield an "incoherent empire" (2003) and America's slow, uneven but inexorable decline (2013).

The modern authors make two sorts of interventions in public debate about the health of the nation-state. One is to offer the fruits of their analytic skills and/or empirical research, in the hopes that their new facts and insights will refocus public thinking and policymaking. The other is to make a moral appeal, to inspire readers to become willing to sacrifice in some way for the

United States. The former sort of intervention flows from, and is couched in the language of, their structural analyses. The latter builds upon their moral and voluntaristic explanations, extending the ancient declinists' mode of reasoning. To the extent that the two modes of explanation for decline contradict and undercut each other, the clarity of the authors' interventions in public debate are muddled and confused. Yet, we should not assume that lack of clarity in analysis or message reduces a book's appeal. Sachs and Ferguson, whom as we have seen suffer the most from mixed and contradictory messages, are the authors whose works have sold the best and who have moved most easily between publishing and appearances on television. Perhaps their broad appeal stems from the ability to combine, if not logically reconcile, analytic and moral messages.

Mann, Wallerstein, and Arrighi demonstrate the narrow range for public sociology, at least in discussions of American decline. Since they see U.S. decline as irreversible, they are forced to confine their policy recommendations to mitigating the effects of decline. That certainly leaves ample potential to offer recommendations. Yet, in avoiding appeals for moral renewal, the sociologists surrender most of the rhetorical ground upon which studies of decline have been conducted. There certainly is potential for different ways to present alternatives and to motivate readers to work towards those. We see glimpses of those in Wallerstein's words for the left and Mann's plea for Bush not to be reelected. However, both authors present the alternatives mainly as different logical possibilities and assume rather than demonstrate the moral superiority of their visions. The sociologists, too, along with Kennedy, generally avoid shifting between analysis and prescription. Instead of illustrating lessons about human nature and fate, the sociologists model the operation of capitalism or the exercise of power. Those models can predict the fate of societies, but their lessons are intellectual rather than moral. They preclude the

possibility that voluntaristic reforms will avert outcomes determined by structural forces. As a result, the sociologists' decline texts are not positioned to impact decline-directed public policy and reform. Instead, they take a page from Sallust's playbook by modernizing fate into models of self-propelling social systems.

Modern authors have not escaped from the rhetorical tropes and modes of analysis employed by ancient authors. Instead, they have split the two main elements of ancient narratives. Most contemporary authors (including the numerous popular and political writers who are not included in our analysis) draw on the ancients' willingness to evaluate and condemn human morality but have modernized that aspect by approaching human behavior as malleable and reformable through analysis and persuasion. At the same time, these authors have modernized the ancients' reliance on fate to propel decline by attempting to identify (often through comparative analysis of multiple cases) structural forces that can explain decline. This split, between proposals for reform and structural analysis, introduces a tension in almost all the modern authors' books that they fail to resolve. In appealing to readers and the public-at-large to reflect and reform, these authors suggest that structural forces are merely provisional and can be overturned at will. This undercuts the rigor with which they can deploy structural forces to explain American decline.

There are three core points to take away from this study, two of them conceptual and one of them methodological. Methodologically, the study suggests a new temporal horizon for comparative-historical sociologists. *Longue durée* analysis emerges in these pages as a powerful tool for critically unpacking contemporary social narratives. Our specific aim here has been to set some of the issues intrinsic to modern declinist literature into a long-term historical context that shows how a series of questions about morality, order, and supremacy have persisted from

ancient Rome to the 21st century United States. Although comparative-historical sociologists are not tied to hard-and-fast rules about what time periods qualify as acceptable sources of study cases, they tend to avoid the pre-modern period. Whatever the reasons – linguistic unfamiliarity or perceived empirical irrelevance – the effect of this tendency to overlook ancient cases means that existing theories of social phenomena are built of data drawn from a very limited selection of the human social experience.

Conceptually, our paper demonstrates that decline theory is neither an objective analysis of the world nor a radical reorganization of social thought. Declinist narrative is, we have argued, a genealogy of thought reaching back at least to the 2nd century BC and encompassing nearly every conceivable position: decline is tragic or salutary, decline is inevitable or reversible, or decline is not decline at all but rather something else. *Longue durée* textual analysis revealed declinist texts to be characterized chiefly as reformulations of persistent anxieties about the end of status quo power arrangements. The second conceptual contribution is to clarify the ideological ontology of decline narratives. All social narratives are subjective to some extent. Decline narratives, we have argued, are particularly useful vehicles for political statements because they are driven by a purported concern for social stability that is, at base, a concern that status quo power arrangements be protected.

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