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Jacques Barzun. *From Dawn to Decadence, 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life.* New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins: 2000

Despite much overlap, cultural history is not the same as history of ideas, let alone the history of philosophy. It is entirely too much, too multifarious. This particular book, Barzun's magnum opus, puts on view an amazing set of blendings, in which the sum-total of a lifetime's scholarship is reworked and packaged for the specialist and the general reader alike. Even with inevitable compression and complex interminglings of concepts, Barzun keeps his book reader-friendly, by means of a supple style, numerous entertaining sidelights and quotes, and by his original simplifications of the conventional scholarly apparatus. The shrewd downplaying of pedantic devices makes the weighty tome easier to get through. In short, he had so much to say, and it is all well said.

What sorts of theoretical unities does Barzun suggest, as giving structure to his multidimensional story? For one thing, he proposes a set of recurring themes, that is, "expressed ideas or implied purposes," showing up now and then across the run of 500 years. These are: abstraction, analysis, emancipation, secularism, self-consciousness, and specialism. (He puts them in small caps whenever they appear in their many guises and combinations.) Now other "isms" are far more localized as trends or tendencies, though they may obtain for quite some time. These are simply capitalized; typical examples are: Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism, Naturalism, Liberalism, and Populism. Barzun's observations upon Romanticism, to take one example, are more thorough and subtle than those he makes in earlier writings. He declines to offer any simple definition. It should be noted that "isms," whether themes or tendencies, do not at all offer the exactitude that philosophers and political or social scientists might prefer. Barzun's terms float in media res, between the broadly educated reader and all sorts of scholars.

What about periodicities within Barzun's half-millennium? It is punctuated successively by four revolutions. The first is religious, anti-Catholic; the second one, monarchial, has feudalism as its target; the third, liberal, moves out primarily from the French Revolution; and the last, diffusively expressed and sinister in its "demotic" consequences, is the social revolution. It is clear that Populism and accelerating economic trends devalue high culture ("Western Civ must go!") and in this

respect combine as the major factors making for Decadence.

Another distinctive device employed by Barzun is that of setting out his perspectives, as if located in different world cities. The dates given are approximate centers falling between significant decades. These "cross-sections" engage periods for the usual lifetimes of individuals—covering life experiences, outlooks upon neighboring Western phenomena, and memories from their immediate past. (He works out from Madrid about 1540, Venice about 1650, London about 1715, Weimar around 1790, Paris about 1830, and Chicago around 1895.) The Western world gets covered from such perspectives; there then take place many lively cross-cultural intramural civilizational exchanges.

Barzun's chapters succeed in blending literary, artistic, political, philosophic, scientific, and technological materials. So he does not sort out broad treatments by parallel chapters as do, for example, the Will Durants in their "Story of Civilization" series. Provocative comments, often by under-appreciated literary figures, and by Barzun himself as their defending patron and interlocutor, are prone to undermine the clichés and accepted Common Wisdom of historians and other scholars.

Multiperspectival viewings, intramural to the West, across five centuries, thus provide cross-cultural warm-ups among Western cultures for thinkings about outward Western impacts elsewhere. The "old imperialisms" of Spain and Portugal, and then their belated holdovers from Europe, continuously spilling into economic and political forms of "new imperialisms," are alluded to more regarding their contact points than is any full interplay with non-Western reactions to the intrusive powers.

What does Barzun offer in the way of cross-civilizational allusions? Within his chapter "The Forgotten Troop," he presents a substantial section on Napoleon's French mission to Egypt and on the savants' accumulations of knowledge. Necessarily, he earlier had to speak of the Western hemisphere's falling into European hands, especially as this becomes incorporated within Western civilization. All this was the early phase of what he later refers to as the "Europeanization of the globe."

We encounter other brief allusions to various colonialisms, to rising reactive Fundamentalism in Islam, to the Boxer Rebellion, and to recent Separatist tendencies in the East as well as in the West. One exception: a quotation on Yoga from Swami Vivekananda is given, reflective of the sage's remarkable appearance at the Congress of World Religions, held at the Chicago Exposition. An indirect and cautionary

observation on colonialism came into the story from Kipling's poem "Recessional," written as coinciding with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The crises of the Great War, the Russian Revolution, and their combined world-wide ramifications, spreading Populist and nationalist trends across the West and then its wider environs alike, have made for "Demotic," decadent consequences. With refined irony, often tongue-in-cheek, Barzun points all these out in his final four chapters.

One might glancingly compare Barzun on "decadence" with Sorokin on "overripe sensate culture"; both point to a decline of creativity, to an exhaustion of positive energies, while Sorokin's is a far more generalized notion than Barzun's highly local and particularized account.¹ Where particularity becomes the test, it may seem profitable to consider Barzun's "decadence" in light of Arthur Herman's "idea of decline," as specific to the West.² But Herman's enterprise assumes a sourer tone than does Barzun's in that it consists of Cassandra-bashing, since he regards the bringing of bad news as outrageous. (Herman is like a miner, irritated at lunchtime being interrupted by the canary bird's floppings about on the floor of its cage. Or he's like Macbeth, raging at the "whey-faced loon" telling him about Dunsinane.) While Barzun clearly documents tendencies making for Western decadence within the past two centuries, more than Herman he highlights many positive features.

Now we turn toward our summing up: apparently Jacques Barzun only suggests, through various contact points, civilizational issues (apart from Western intra-mural exchanges.) This need not frustrate the cross-civilizationist; he does clearly note outward Western impingements. These can serve as dots to be interconnected by lines, for a not entirely uninformative sketch to emerge. Consider imperial expansions of civilizations (plus those of sub-civilizations like Marxisms). Besides the extension of raw power, connected with that there is the thrust of a "reigning myth," congenial to expansionist power elites.

Direct associations hold between Conquistadors and Roman Catholicism, and between Soviet invaders and Communism. Indirect linkages may be seen between British and American "new imperialisms" and their follow-up troops of persuasive Protestant missions. More worldly "reigning myths" come in with businesses and the International Monetary Fund, and with the long-term pro-democratic exhortations indulged in by moralizing statesmen fond of the Wilsonian image. (The Cable News Network's televising of our recent election should put a slight, if hilarious, damper on that sales-pitch.)

Self-knowledge in terms of Western culture, attained through vast accumulations of arts and human sciences, has been flourishing. But sometimes, "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." And Western follies and failures are increasingly manifest to all hands. To those sensitive to reality, as regards consumerism and outrageous popular culture, not to mention egregious foreign policy failures, Western self-confidence is decidedly on the wane. Barzun's work is a detailed documentation of why that's so. All that points to the hard core of our decadence; the famous spread of high technology doesn't count, since it so rapidly falls into hostile hands.

Barzun concludes his final chapter with a whimsical projective viewing supposedly from his New York home base in 1995. Supporting his whimsy is an undue generosity toward computerization, given that the NASDAQ has driven onto bumpy ground since the book's publication.

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1. Sorokin's "over-ripe sensate culture comprehends "passive" and "cynical" elements. The "active" mode was dominant, as it were, in earlier parts of the 19C. Currently, the more decadent modes prevail. Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (abridged), New Brunswick, N.J.; Transaction Books, 1985, pp. 27-28.
 2. Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1997.

—Palmer Talbutt