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On Mass Culture and Civilizational Mediocrity

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A number of prominent 19th and 20th century German thinkers held very negative views towards Anglo-American culture, more specifically its mercantile capitalism, its liberal democracy and (and what they perceived to be) its mass culture of mediocrity.

This paper will examine these negative views in the following sequence: Nietzsche’s criticisms of Democracy, Heidegger’s conflation of American culture and Soviet Communism as “metaphysically both the same,” Adorno’s critique of the “culture industry” especially in America1, and finally, Spengler’s condemnation of capitalism as hastening the Decline of the West.

There are some valid and interesting arguments in all these critiques, and I will also try to illustrate their relevance for today’s post-modern age. However, I will also identify and analyze key points where I believe they are fundamentally mistaken.

Nietzsche’s Critique of Democracy as Mediocrity

Nietzsche’s critique of Mill’s Utilitarianism provides an entry into his critique of Democracy in general. According to Utilitarian theory as put forth by thinkers such as Mill and Bentham, the definition of morality is “that which promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people.” This criterion of morality sounds eminently reasonable to those raised in a liberal democracy, yet Nietzsche found it deeply problematic, because according to him, all men are not created equal, and therefore should not count equally in the moral calculus. Some individuals are nobler than others, some more intelligent, some stronger – some are simply worth more than others.

Democratic institutions, which so proudly count equality, fairness and egalitarianism as ideals, thus perpetuate mediocrity and “penalize the excellent” (Baradat, 239).

Heidegger clearly would later agree with Nietzsche’s elitism here, arguing that “the essential always comes and returns to human beings, thereby forcing them to superiority and allowing them to act on the basis of rank” (IM, 35, Kisiel, 229).

1 The term ‘America’ as used in this paper refers to the USA, not South America, Central America or Canada.
Heidegger argued further how the presuppositions of both Anglo-American liberal democracy and Soviet communism have played a major role in “this onslaught of that which destroys all rank and all that is spiritual about the world,” leading to “the preeminence of the mediocre.” (IM 34, Kisiel, 229).

For Nietzsche, strong and proud men who rise above the herd, and rise above “mortal standards of right and wrong” are Germany’s only future, not the mediocrity exemplified by a moribund German bourgeoisie. Nietzsche argued that the most serious culprit behind Europe’s malaise was actually Christianity, which replaced the ancient Homeric values of heroism, honor and strength with an oppressive and unnatural slave morality of weakness, repression and humility.

Christianity, as it originally grew as a Jewish sect under brutal Roman rule, was based on the “ressentiment” the weak felt towards those in power, and thus in Christianity, mankind’s true values have now therefore been reversed—humility and meekness are now considered virtues, while strength and pride are now derided.

This value shift resulted in the perversion of the true human essence and essentially sapped the strength of the German nation, thereby transforming a once proud warrior people into a tired and mediocre nation of repressed, bourgeois shopkeepers and bureaucrats. Yet, the institution of Democracy, with its egalitarian ideals, e.g., “all men are created equal,” also came in for severe criticism.

Nietzsche offered one of the more piercing analyses of the marked sense of the spiritual exhaustion, decadence and taedium vitae in 19th century German culture. This malaise partially explains the naïve enthusiasm all across Europe for the Great War, which was viewed by so many young men as a cathartic opportunity for spiritual rebirth and renewal. The “savage contest” of war, the primordial opposition of life and death, the nobility of struggle, and glory on the battlefield all beckoned as an escape from the stifling conformity and repression of conventional Victorian bourgeois life.

According to George Mosse in his article “Caesarism, Circuses and Monuments“, Nietzsche “reawakened to life…” the archetype of “the great man” in history. A proud and strong “healthy Zarathustra” would rise out of a spiritually bankrupt Germany to fulfill “the longing for a leader….when existing forms of government had…become decadent,” finally realizing the “sacred tie”…between “leader and led” (Mosse, 117).

We see similar patterns later on in Spengler’s Decline of the West, a work “obsessed with the death of old forms of moral and political life” (Mosse, 117). Spengler later argued that only a proud strong leader, “the rise of a new Caesar” through Germans sacrificing their own blood, could overthrow “the money machine” of a bankrupt
Western Capitalism. (Zimmerman, 196) Moreover, like Junger, Spengler believed that a fearsome elite must adopt “Roman hardness” (See Zimmerman, 197). Spengler thus elucidates his version of “Nationalist Socialism” - “We need hardness, we need fearless skepticism, we need a class of socialist master men...Once again, socialism means power, power, and yet again, power” (Zimmerman, 197).

Spengler sees this rise of a new Caesar as the solution to the problem of the decline of the west and the specter of nihilism. But perhaps the real truth behind these militaristic ideas is expressed in this quote from Hermann Broch’s novel *The Sleepwalkers*: “there is no severity that may not be a mask for fear.”

What exactly was the object of this fear, and why was it so widespread? The object was a decadent modernity, characterized by a radical dissolution of values, which left for many Europeans only a spiritual void and a sense of impending apocalypse. Unfortunately, this spiritual void later came to be filled in Germany by Hitler, who sought German redemption through the promise of economic stability, the exploitation of ancient hatreds, as well as (unconsciously) the use of crude interpretations of Teutonic myth—i.e., spiritual renewal through blood sacrifice (see Griffin, 271, ff).

According to Mosse, Spengler’s magnum opus is an “apotheosis of the new politics in which masses and leader interact without any intervening, quasi-independent institution” (114). This new politics invokes a leader who is a “pragmatist” and who can “manipulate the masses and...use existing society for the purpose of its own destruction. Ideally the amorphous mass will be integrated into a higher unity through the strong will of the leader who...is able to activate their deeper longings” (115).

Although thinkers like Spengler and Heidegger at first believed this leader would “activate the longings of the German masses for a higher unity”, in reality the activation came mostly from delusions of world domination fed by the invocation and actual implementation of mass murder on an almost unimaginable scale.

**Heidegger on the “Massification of Man”**

The concept of mass society grew in importance in interwar German consciousness, as many turned to nationalism as a secure foothold against the anxieties of the modern age, with its loss of order and the disintegration of traditional values. Discussing the relation between nationalism and the concept of the mass society, George Mosse writes of the “mobilization of private discontent into collectivities that promised to transcend the anxieties of the modern age, promising a happy and healthy world protected against the rush of time” (Mosse, 1).
Heidegger’s harshest critique of the mass is found in *Being and Time*’s classic passages dealing with the concept of the “they-self” as related to the ideal of authenticity. Heidegger’s analysis here owes much to Kierkegaard, who, in *The Modern Age* wrote derisively of “the public” and the “leveling” of the individual into mass society.

This notion of leveling refers to a pervasive situation in which any and all instances of exceptionalism are immediately denigrated in the interests of a bland and stifling conformity. Heidegger writes how “this polished averageness of the everyday interpretation of Dasein watches over every exception which thrusts itself to the fore...” so that “every exception is short lived and quietly suppressed.” (See A. Hannay, in Wrathal & Malpas, 105 ff)

Heidegger continues:

> This being with one another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of being of ‘the Others’, in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of ‘the they’ is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure, we read, see and judge about literature and art as they see and judge, and we find shocking what they find shocking. The ‘they’ which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness (*Being and Time*, 164).

This pattern applies to all humanity, in a universal sense. It is a fundamental structure of the human condition itself. But levels of conformity, and degrees to which societies level individuals into the mass, may be more strongly pronounced in some civilizations than in others - some may in fact be more permeated with inauthenticity than others.

Heidegger’s critique of “the massification of man,” a theme going back at least to *Being and Time*, is explicitly stated in his famous 1935 passage of Europe’s place in the larger geopolitical order. Heidegger wrote that Europe lies in the great pincers between Russia on one side and America on the other.

> “Russia and America are, when viewed metaphysically, both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and the boundless organization of the average man” (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 28).
For those of us raised in the USA during the height of the cold war, such a statement seems quite paradoxical, because American Democracy and Soviet Communism seemed so radically different, both in their philosophical presuppositions and in their respective versions of everyday life.²

For Heidegger, America was “a land without history, a culture without roots…preoccupied by size, expansion, magnitude and quantity” (see Bambach, 163).

Other German thinkers, e.g., Max Scheler and Stefan Zweig, said much the same thing. For example, Zweig, in “The Monotonization of the World”, lamented the process by which “everything is becoming more uniform in its outward manifestations, everything leveled into a uniform cultural scheme.”

Zweig asserts further that it is in fact America that is “the source of that terrible wave of uniformity that gives everyone the same…book in the hand, the same pen between the fingers, the same conversation on the lips,” yet he also attributes this same leveling mechanism to Russia, in which “the same will to monotony presses ominously in a different form: the will to compartmentalization of the individual, to conformity in world views…”.

It is Europe, Zweig says, “that remains the last bulwark of individualism,” and he explains the nationalism of European countries, despite its “senselessness,” as a “last desperate effort to defend ourselves against the leveling” process (Zweig, in Kaes, et al, 399).

Heidegger’s attraction to Nazism may have lay in part with his deep anti-modernist tendencies, though he eventually realized that Nazism was in many ways as much a product of modernity as capitalist America ---with its crass consumerism, mindless television and stifling conformity--- or Soviet Communism ---with its gray block architecture and dreary all-encompassing sameness (see Griffin, 224 ff, 321 ff).

German National Socialism shared with American capitalism and Russian communism both the same “hopeless frenzy of unchained technology. “In fact, Germany’s “total entry into the industrial and arms race” in preparation for a war of world domination (Kisiel, 4) and the “boundless organization of the average man” - exemplified by “the tallies of millions at mass meetings” - could both “clearly describe the Nuremberg Rallies of 1933 and 1934” (Kisiel, 3).

² In fact, because of their exposure to these regimes, members of the so-called “greatest generation” and the cold-war generation may have more familiarity with these issues than younger scholars. Yet the younger thinkers have actually witnessed the increased “leveling” of culture, as mass media and information technology (and the extent of their reach) have proliferated exponentially since the cold-war period. The topic thus has increased relevance today.
Fascists such as Hitler and Mussolini took full advantage of mass psychology, stirring up the people into an emotional, irrational frenzy. Hitler was aware that in destitute times and in certain contexts of mass consciousness, rational argument stands little chance in competition for the allegiance of the populace against more primal, visceral appeals.

Plato, in his famous criticism of Democracy in *Republic*, argued that often, vulnerable individuals get so caught up in the contagious excitement of the crowd that they lose essential critical thinking skills:

> When…many gathered together sit down in assemblies…or any other common meeting of a multitude, and, with a great deal of uproar, blame some of the things said or done, and praise others, both in excess, shouting and clapping; and, besides, the rocks and the very place surrounding them echo and redouble the uproar of blame and praise. Now, in such circumstances…what do you suppose is the state of the young man’s heart? Or what kind of private education will hold out for him and not be swept away by such blame and praise and go, borne by the flood, wherever it tends so that he’ll say the same things are noble and base as they do, practice what they practice, and be such as they are? (*Republic*, 492c, p. 172, Bloom trans).

Plato’s quote could thus well be describing the current Democratic or Republican National Convention phenomena --- on one hand the results of democracy at work, yet on the other hand, an increasingly vacuous sort of event dominated by image projection and sound bites --- where any semblance of rational discourse is overshadowed by mob-psychology and often fallacious appeals to emotion.

**Adorno on The Culture Industry and the Promotion of Mediocrity**

Fascist demagogues like Hitler whipped the masses into a frenzy of adrenaline and hate to accomplish a political agenda. But Adorno discusses how the mass media can also be used soporifically to lull the masses into an indifferent stupor for its political advantage.

Adorno’s approach puts a Marxist spin on Heidegger’s version of the “they-self,” arguing how the powers of capitalism use homogenized leveled-down products of mass culture to lull the masses into a mindless stupor. The masses will then be less likely to challenge the injustice of the socio-economic status quo.

Products of mass culture thereby function as mechanisms of distraction by which the capitalist system anesthetizes its citizens from the reality of their own oppression, “never leaving the consumer alone long enough to reflect upon their boring
exhausting jobs and their low socio-economic status” (Dodson, 2). The culture industry feeds the masses a bland and steady diet of “harmless amusements,” effectively leveling down any morally significant insights into a bland mediocrity.

Many of these same lines of criticism are often lodged at Hollywood movies and mainstream media today.

Consider also phenomena such as the music played in elevators and dentist offices. This is the “leveling down” of art, offering the “least objectionable programming” to the greatest number of people, “pandering to mediocrity” so as not “to disturb or challenge a ‘normal’ listener” (Campbell, et al, 23). The masses are also anesthetized by the endless supply of celebrity gossip, sports programming, etc., as it essentially functions to take their attention from their own problems and oppression.

Consider in our present day, the ever-present “news” about the latest degenerate celebrities.

This “news” distracts the masses from realizing how, unlike these millionaires who actually do little to earn their fortunes, many Americans work two or three jobs but still can’t afford health insurance. Mediocrity therefore can be (and in fact has been) promoted through mass culture for political gain.

It should, however, be noted that the need for diversion may grip members of all socio-economic classes. Members of the elite classes in capitalist systems may flock to country clubs, golf courses and exotic vacation destinations as part of an unconscious effort to distract themselves from questions even more fundamental than socio-economic ones – issues related to the radical finitude and contingency of the human condition in general. As thinkers such as Heidegger and Pascal realized, we may actually seek the diversion of the leveling process to escape not so much economic oppression but, more basically, the harshness of the human condition itself.

Spengler on “The Money Machine”

Democracies have often existed together with capitalist economic systems, and in turn these societies have become more commercialized and money driven, resulting in their ultimate banalization.

Spengler’s *Decline of the West* was a major work of the interwar period in Germany critical of modern industrial capitalism and what it considered its new god, money.

According to Spengler, modern industrial capitalism has replaced the primordial value of the land with the phenomenon of “money separated from goods” (see Spengler, 403 ff). Spengler contrasts the Earth, something “real and natural” with
money, which is “abstract and artificial” (see Herf, 56). The pernicious effect of the “cash-nexus” (Herf, 58) is that it effectively “saps the energy of the race” by arousing in them “an appetite for an ugly, common, wholly unmetaphysical fear for one’s life.” Economic life thus destroys “the higher form world of culture, replacing it with an unfettered struggle for survival” (Spengler, quoted in Herf, 58).

Through the modern capitalist money machine, “goods turn into commodities, exchange becomes commerce and ‘money-thinking’ proliferates”, resulting in a reified, rootless conception of man in which all that is noble, dignified and honest has now become debased by the increasingly desperate scrambling after cash. It has now become necessary, writes Spengler, “to break the dictatorship of money and its political weapon, Democracy” (Spengler, 414).

Similar protests occurred in other countries, e.g., Britain, as Carlyle, Dickens and others rebelled against “market quantification”, “the religion of the god, money” (Carlyle called it “Mammonism”) and “the mechanization of the world” (Lowy & Sayre, 35-43).

Much of Spengler’s critique here actually sounds like orthodox Marxism. It is interesting how Spengler (on the political right) shared with Marx (on the political left) much of the same antipathy towards the alienating and debasing quality of capitalism. This reflects the widespread appeal of Romanticism in the thought of so many artists and thinkers of the time, including Heidegger, Nietzsche, Spengler and Marx.

Romanticism, which involved a backlash against the Industrial Revolution and its cultural transformations, thus cut across all extremes of the political spectrum.

Spengler’s critique also speaks to us uniquely today, especially how it related to the issue of the banalization of society, which Adorno more explicitly addressed. Now in post-modern times, as advertising has become the driving force of capitalism, as mass-media have proliferated dramatically, and as capitalism itself has expanded, so everyday life in many societies has become increasingly saturated with unrelenting commercialism.

Some have called this “cultural pollution,” in that the average citizen in the US, for example, is bombarded with literally hundreds of advertisements a day, on billboards, television, the internet, radio, etc., and this bombardment process exemplifies itself in both obvious and subtle contexts.

This has clearly contributed to the overall banalization of American culture, as corporate entities are constantly attempting to sell us (largely unnecessary) products and services, therefore magnifying an already pervasive consumer culture.
Every area of human expression has thereby become infiltrated and controlled by the marketplace, reducing even life’s noblest and most existential elements to possible contexts for economic transaction. Moreover, when economic times become depressed, the efforts of capitalists to sell their products increase, thus resulting in an even more desperate and banal spiritual landscape.

Discussion: Mass Culture and Civilizational Mediocrity

One way of understanding this entire divide is to first try to understand the “European crisis of modernity” that Nietzsche, Heidegger and others ultimately attempted to overcome, and then look at the discussion of this situation among academic philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic. Regarding this “crisis of modernity,” Robert Pippin in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* writes of how a “collective and sudden realization has come upon European consciousness” that “all the fundamental ideals of the Enlightenment enterprise…have failed in some catastrophic way… the authority of such ideals has collapsed” (Pippin, 147).

It is not merely the case that a number of isolated or minor propositions have been proven true or untrue, or that some particular hypothesis has been confirmed or disconfirmed, but rather that an entire “form of life”, “basic mode of orientation” and fundamental “way of mattering” has died (Pippin, 147).

Indeed, writes Pippin, “the accounts provided by the ancient ‘parents’ with their God, their natural hierarchy, their metaphysics, their afterlife, their story of cosmic justice, and so on, were fairy tales, delusions, fantasies. The sun did not revolve around the Earth; there was no immortal soul; aristocratic order had no natural basis, and finally, there was no loving and providential God” (147). It is no wonder that anxiety played such an important role in the thought of Heidegger, Freud and others, an entirely appropriate response to this rapid and comprehensive “disorienting loss of collective ideals” (47).

These were the issues that preoccupied many philosophers in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s. There were, of course, German thinkers uninterested in these matters, such as the logical positivists, who were concerned mostly with the foundations of science and who dismissed the writing of Heidegger and others as ponderous nonsense.

Yet it was the logical positivists who had actually had the most impact upon the Anglo-American philosophical world. Anglo-American thinkers were not particularly interested in the “crisis of modernity.” Perhaps for them, no such crisis existed. While poets like Yeats and T.S. Eliot certainly engaged questions about the crisis of
modernity, these questions were simply not addressed by academic philosophers in Britain or America.

British thinkers of this time (e.g., Moore, Russell, Austin) were primarily preoccupied with conceptual analysis through analysis of language and logic. Wittgenstein was a strange case – from Vienna, his writings were as cryptic as anything written by Heidegger, yet dealt primarily with issues of language and logic, and were celebrated by the British analytic schools of philosophy.

America’s only homegrown philosophical movement was Pragmatism, according to which the value of theories was determined primarily by whether they were useful or somehow “worked” for specific purposes.

American pragmatism was thus a concrete and results-oriented approach to philosophy. Was it true, as Heidegger said, that the Germans alone (except for the ancient Greeks) were a “metaphysical Volk,” while all the others were not? Or was it something else, the specific direction and/or location of time, place, and history?

As Nietzsche in the 19th century presciently saw Europe’s decline and called for a radical “transvaluation of values,” Heidegger’s position (and Spengler’s also) was more one of horror and apprehension.

The writings of both of the latter reflected the actual lived twentieth century experience of the horrors of the First World War, Germany’s economic collapse and postwar humiliation, as well as Europe’s increasing level of decadence. By contrast to the desperate state of Europe, both America and Soviet Russia were relatively new civilizations, “up and coming” as opposed to weary and disintegrating.

This is not to say that the US was not at all decadent in the 1920s – it surely was, as the classics of American literature of the time (e.g., F. Scott Fitzgerald) attested. But the US and the USSR (and especially America) at the time also represented the height of modernity, and seemed to be building ever higher and expanding ever further. This is true even given, for example, the Great Depression in the US, and other serious, albeit temporary, economic setbacks.

While thinkers like Heidegger may have viewed American pragmatism as shallow and calculating, others saw instead refreshing optimism and a “can-do” spirit.

It has thus been suggested that Heidegger’s critique of mass culture in the USA and USSR was based primarily upon fear about the (very real) collapse of Europe (specifically Germany) — a once great culture now in a state of rapid disintegration. Heidegger’s pessimistic critique has thus been interpreted as “a projection of European fears and ambivalence about its own culture transposed on the new world”
(see Bambach, 163), revealing more about German society at the time than either America or Russia.

Moreover, mass culture aside, it is clear that the US and the USSR at this time were not at all, as Heidegger claimed, “metaphysically both the same.” At first, the Soviet “Communists regarded their government and their revolution as epoch-making events in the development of humanity” and “the Soviet Union managed to capture the imagination of some who hoped for a Utopian, egalitarian transformation of society” (Craig, et al, 757). However, Soviet Russia was led at this time by Stalin, a brutal mass murderer arguably as bad as Hitler.

All things considered, there is some truth in the anti-American critiques discussed above.

Writing on the critical European view of Americanism, historian Detlev Peukert quotes the Protestant cleric Gunter Dehn’s disapproval of proletarian German youth becoming increasingly Americanized: “If we were to ask them about the meaning and purpose of life, the only answer they could give would be: ‘We don’t know what the purpose of life is, and we’re not interested in finding out’” (Peukert, 178).

The cleric was appalled at how German youth now had only “making money and enjoying themselves” as priorities. These are in fact what so many European considered the sum of American values, a viewpoint “truly bereft of metaphysics” (Peukert, 178).

Alexis de Tocqueville observed long ago that Americans on the whole lacked the patience for speculative matters and abstract discussion, as they always seemed more focused on achieving concrete, practical results. But clearly life on the frontier was difficult, and discussions of metaphysics probably had to take a back seat to more mundane concerns of basic survival.

On a cultural level, it might also be true that Americans have more and more come to define success in explicitly material terms, and that, especially lately, the emphasis on financial gain and material accumulation has led America in some problematic economic and spiritual directions. And perhaps it is hard to imagine German philosophers like Adorno ever really feeling at home while exiled in Hollywood, California, the stereotypically vacuous land of surfboards, bikinis, and voluptuous starlets.

Yet it is perhaps unfair to consider conformity, materialism and mediocrity fundamental symptoms of American life, any more than as with any other nation.
Coherently governing a large mass of people of remarkably heterogeneous origins may in fact require certain “leveling” mechanisms to be in place. Psychological laws reflect how people react to circumstances in predictable ways, and much of the foregoing critique regarding “leveling” and mediocrity can be said to apply to human social patterns and political institutions generally, not just in one or two particular cultures.

Furthermore, American government is a unique political system that has actually been relatively successful, due to the wisdom of some of its architects. Political thinkers like Madison and Jefferson read their history and ensured that complex mechanisms of checks and balances, separations of powers, federalism, etc., were put in place, so that no one particular individual or political party could successfully oppress existing minorities. American history has certainly had some very dark hours, such as antebellum slavery and the horrible treatment of its indigenous Indian population. Yet, as a civilization existing unto itself, America has at least been able to see itself through the Civil War, major overseas conflicts and severe economic depressions, and has also been able to absorb great waves of immigration, without repressive dictatorships or factories of mass murder. The same can’t be said about Stalin’s Russia or Hitler’s Germany (the latter of which Heidegger unfortunately supported). Compared to these political and humanitarian disasters, a bit of conformity, vacuity and even mediocrity are perhaps not the worst problems to have.

A Cautionary Note

Although American civilization can thus be defended against some of the above arguments of Spengler, Heidegger and others, their viewpoints on the other hand can’t smugly be dismissed as merely the irrational ravings of frightened reactionaries.

Many in the US today have suggested lately that America itself is currently in decline. Moreover, the decline is not merely economic, for the current economic crisis in the US also rests upon a certain amount of moral decline, as the recent proliferation of scandals in the financial sector has revealed.

While the economic divide between rich and poor in the USA grows ever wider, our military is overextended and unemployment is widespread; too many of us react to all this by simply distracting ourselves into oblivion with videogames and silly technological gadgets. Phenomena such as military overuse and patterns of mass distraction have been identified as characteristics of declining civilizations. And clearly, the sense of optimism and forward-looking confidence that characterized America in, say, 1961 seems a relic of the distant past.
However, it is not an easy task to diagnose the spiritual health of a civilization when one is currently living in it. We lack the historical distance and philosophical objectivity necessary to discern meaningful patterns and to effectively put them in context.

Moreover, we ought to resist simplistic urges towards nostalgia, as it often turns out upon reflection that “the good old days” were never all that good. These matters are complicated, and I will not pursue them further here. However, it is my view that we need to read thinkers like Spengler and Heidegger very carefully, and then proceed with our post-modern American condition employing no small amount of caution.

References
