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Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

Why we fell: Declinist writing and theories of imperial failure in the *longue durée*



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 4 February 2015

Keywords:

Social narrative
Power
Decline
Ancient Rome
United States
Comparative

ABSTRACT

Great powers in transition produce intellectuals who explain that transition as decline. Our goal in this article is to compare how writers in ancient Rome and the contemporary United States understood the trajectories of their societies, and to account for why some of those authors saw decline as inevitable while others proposed policies to reverse the problems they diagnosed. In so doing, we trace the development of a key idea about society through the *longue durée*. We do not seek to determine whether each author's analysis is 'correct.' Rather, we want to explain how authors in each era constructed their arguments and to whom they directed their writings, and understand how modes of analysis and exposition have changed over the millennia. We find that ancient authors generally saw decline as inevitable and stemming primarily from moral causes. Modern authors can be divided into two groups. One sees decline stemming from a mix of moral and structural causes, and as potentially reversible. The other analyzes decline in structural terms and presents it as irreversible. Our findings have implications for sociological work on how ideas are constructed through time, and how social scientists grappling with macro-level change build on enduring ontologies.

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1. Introduction

How do intellectuals 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 be perceived as being in decline, nor is it the first nation whose intellectuals have grappled with their society's fading fortunes. In this article, we do not offer our own view on whether or why the U.S. is in decline. Rather, we seek to identify the range of themes, rhetorical styles and logics of explanation in a subset of 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 thought they were experiencing 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 and especially 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); however, as an Athenian he was an outside observer of Spartan affairs).

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 and Block, 2005;

Steinmetz, 1992).³ Through their repetition of themes 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 sustained by its authors' intellectual and political commitments, and in turn supports 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 echo ancient themes, 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.

2. 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; Braudel, 1982). 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).

Our study is concerned with identifying different ways in which a single concept, decline, can be analyzed and deployed. We diverge from conventional *longue durée* studies by weighing equally decline theorists' political and professional identities and their temporal locations. Gross (2002, p. 55) observes that intellectuals create "self-narratives" that seek to achieve "congruence" between their ideas and identities. In the case of our Roman and American authors their identity is grounded in part on a belief that they are living in a time and place of decline. Their "social experiences not only provide the 'facts' that self-narratives make sense of, but they also provide the concepts, categories, metaphors, frames of meaning, and plot lines that structure those narratives" Gross (2002, p. 54). Our goal is to identify the descriptive, analytic and evaluative elements declinist authors use to construct their narratives. Although all the declinist works we examine are non-fiction, we follow Hayden White and view these texts as literary in the sense that they are conscious products of their authors' efforts to construct "metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings" (1978, p. 88).

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 touchstone 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.

³ With Haydu (1998), we recognize that narrative seeks to identify a logical flow through periods and events but may blur or overlook entirely the relationships among variables that actually reveal causality. One of our goals is to determine which commentators on Roman and American decline sought to identify causal relationships and which ones used narrative to construct stories of decline that served as social commentary.

2.1. Modern texts

We examine ten contemporary authors (two of whom collaborate with each other). We do not attempt to draw a representative sample from a universe of declinist writing. Rather we picked mainly academics who span the political spectrum, from neo-conservative to Marxist. The preponderance of academic authors biases our analysis in the direction of texts that highlight social forces rather than human agency and morality, and are therefore more likely to present decline as inevitable rather than reversible. In other words, we chose the academics among 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.

Three of our modern authors straddle the worlds of academia and applied public policy. [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 book *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. [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.

Four of the modern authors in our sample identify themselves explicitly as neo-conservatives. Co-authors Donald and Frederick [Kagan](#) were history professors at Yale and West Point respectively when *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* was published in 2000. As of this writing, Frederick Kagan is a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Victor Davis Hanson is a military historian, specializing in the ancient world, who has been affiliated with various colleges and the Hoover Institution. His *The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern* (2010) compares ancient and contemporary wars. [Max Boot](#) worked as a journalist and, since 2002, as a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations. His *War Made New: Weapons, Warriors, and the Making of the Modern World* (2006) traces the evolution of military technology and strategy from the sixteenth century to the Iraq War. The Kagans, Hanson and Boot wrote their books for an educated, general audience with the aim of influencing debate on present-day American military and foreign policy.

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. While all the modern books we examine draw comparisons between the United States and historical societies, the three sociologists, along with Kennedy, stand apart from the other authors in our sample by constructing or drawing upon 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 extend 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) 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 by leaving their models largely implicit. These books were written at somewhat different moments: *Incoherent Empire* addresses the Afghan war but not the war in Iraq, *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* were writing 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 pointedly address policymakers are concerned mainly with presenting proposals they believe would be effective in reversing decline and/or ensuring U.S. predominance. As a result, they do not critically assess whether decline is irreversible nor are they concerned with constructing explanations that could be generalized over time or across cases. Examination of policy analyses, the arguments of journalists such as Thomas Friedman, or of bloggers and other informal comments on American decline are beyond the scope of this article but will be important elements of a more comprehensive study of declinist thought.

2.2. Ancient texts

From antiquity, we selected three main texts: [Sallust's *Catiline Conspiracy*](#), [Ammianus Marcellinus's *Res Gestae*](#), and [Zosimus's *Historia Nova*](#). The sample imbalance (three ancient versus ten contemporary authors) is explained in part by the relative paucity of surviving works from antiquity. Moreover, although decline was a general theme of moral anxiety 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 1st century BC events (the fall of the Roman Republic). 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 cultural practices ([Chenault, 2012](#)). We chose to include Ammianus because his *Res Gestae*, composed in the late 4th century, features a well-developed theory on why Rome's authority eroded. In it, he covers the years AD 353–378. 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.

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 6th century, he attempted to cover the period early 3rd to early 5th 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.

Several exclusions from our list of ancient authors merit explanation.⁴ We chose not to include the 2nd century BC Greek historian Polybius, even though he is often cited as an early authority on Rome's trajectory of power. Polybius sought to understand “[How], and by what kind of state, almost the whole of the known world was overpowered and fell under the single dominion of the Romans in a space of not quite fifty-three years, something that had never happened before?” (Polybius *Hist.* I.1) Several important issues that arise from Polybius's puzzle are complementary to the analysis of decline: the nature of power in ancient empires; the instruments of domination available to Rome (and to its subjects); and the instability of domestic politics, among others ([Eckstein, 1995](#); [Smith and Yarrow, 2012](#); [Walbank, 2002](#)). But Polybius's project was to explain Rome's exceptional rise, and that

⁴ For further commentary on our selection process generally, and specifically on ancient authors we excluded from the sample, see the online appendix.

undertaking is of a fundamentally different nature to that of explaining failure. The factors in both cases are neither identical nor inverses.

We excluded Augustine of Hippo's writings on Roman decline because he offers not so much an explanation of imperial decline as a paean to it. Augustine (later canonized as St. Augustine), writing in the late 4th and early 5th centuries AD, distinguished the physical and administrative demise of the city of Rome from the rise of the spiritually rich, morally credible City of God. He stressed a single causal factor—paganism and the rejection of Christ—behind the military losses, famines, invasions, and assassinations that eventually crippled the Western Roman Empire. Augustine's narrative is of undeniable interest to scholars concerned with historical accounts of regime change and social upheaval. But because he places himself in the context of a very specific conversation about Christian doctrine and its inevitable domain, his text is difficult to place alongside the more intellectually ecumenical (though no less polemical) texts of Sallust, Ammianus, and Zosimus.

Finally, 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. We did so because our objective is to compare intellectuals who saw (or see) themselves as living through decline and who therefore had the double task of demonstrating and explaining their society's decline. It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the influence of authors over time, and therefore we exclude Gibbon (1737–1794) who wrote long after Rome's decline and did so with the self-assurance that the Roman Empire was past and that its fall was neatly temporally bound. His job was not to argue, or try to prove, that a decline had taken place, but rather to identify the factors at play in causing it.⁵ Gibbon's temporal remove from Roman decline offered him useful space for retrospection and historical circumspection, but it also allowed him to overlook the work of conceptualizing decline and, instead, to proceed directly to an argument about causes.

2.3. *Methods for analyzing the texts*

We employed an inductive, two-step analysis to identify how the authors' structures, characters and language came together into coherent themes that are often and variously used in conjunction or conflict with each other. We read the works, and identified every passage in each work that referred to decline in a descriptive, explanatory or evaluative manner. We then looked for similarities among those passages in terms of the factors they described, and found they fell into ten coherent themes that were evoked by one or more of the authors: *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*. By theme, we mean writing that through explanation or rhetoric gives coherent meaning to events or conditions in terms of decline. Online Appendix 1 presents a table summarizing each author's position on the most salient aspects of the ten themes. We 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. Further explanation of our selection methods and analytical strategies is available in our online Appendix 2.

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

⁵ In 1984, when German ancient historian Alexander Demandt tallied a list of factors blamed by scholars for Rome's decline, he reached the number 210: from A to Z, the factors ran from "Aberglaube" (Superstition) to Zweifrontenrieg (Two-front War) and included also Christianity, hedonism, moral idealism, the degeneration of intellectuals, and impotence as a result of too many warm baths (*Hyperthermia*). In Gibbon's day there were fewer serious contenders for blame, but Demandt's list gives an idea of the scope of decline analysis and why we have had to exclude even outsized intellectual presences such as Gibbon's.

the state. As such, they 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 and that, unlike the previous six themes, are not embodied by individuals or social groups. *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 authors' rhetorical styles. *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, in other words in terms of how much causal power they assign to actors' agency and morality as opposed to implacable structural forces that are not amenable to applications of human will and moral choice.

3. *Longue durée* 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.

3.1. *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 (or those who claimed to have been eyewitnesses) (Potter, 1999). Roman historians⁶ cannot, however, be said to have engaged in systematic theoretical accounts of the Republic's (and then Empire's) rise and decline (Kapust, 2011).

⁶ The term “Roman historian” requires clarification. We do not assert cultural allegiance or nationality in describing a person or persons as “Roman”; indeed, pinpointing long-dead individuals' sense of socio-cultural identity is fraught with difficulty (Woolf, 1998). Ammianus was born into a Greek-speaking family at Antioch, and Sallust was a native Latin speaker from Rome. They were separated by some 400 years and considerable geographic and cultural differences. When we use the phrases “Roman historian” and “Roman thinkers” we do so as shorthand for thinkers and writers about Rome's decline rather than a statement about identity or ethnic background.

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, 2000: 521–522). Roman thinkers built their arguments on concrete examples, drawn chiefly from Rome's past or near-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, 2000: 520). This helps explain why the category of moral factors more prominently in ancient decline texts than does the category of structure.

Another major difference from modern historical thought was the lack of delineation between “objective” and “subjective” history writing (see Daston and 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. History, in short, was the retelling of accomplishments 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 (Fornara, 1983).

4. Ancient declinist thought: decline as a moral problem

4.1. 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. 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. 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, 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 were concretized and sustained. But the patricians proved a problematic moral model: Sallust blames them for spreading poor morals like a “pestilence” (*Cat.* 10).

In early Rome, Sallust argues, the civic body's morals were at their best (*Cat.* 9.1). Moreover, the production of positive morals (*boni mores*) was a communal project. It was 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 was what finally brought down the once-sturdy Republican oak.

Sallust's extensive treatment of the *civitas mores* (civic morals) 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 (*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 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, 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 basic formula.

Zosimus picks up where Ammianus's narrative ends. Zosimus lived through the gritty aftermath of several sacks of the city of Rome. He, too, blamed Rome's decline on moral crisis. Zosimus recognized social cohesion 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 ancient decline theory as a series of ethical framings (morality, corruption, or patriotism), attributing overall decline to a lowering of personal standards in behavior. This approach differs in several respects to the modern preference for maps, charts, and seemingly objective theories of change. We now return to our modern texts to test whether they sustain this characterization of decline theory.

5. Morals, structures, and prescriptions for recovery in modern declinist narratives

Modern authors address morals as, at best, one factor among several in their causal explanations of America's decline. In all the modern writings morality does not have a direct and unmediated affect on America's prosperity or international standing. Instead, morality works, when it has any consequence at all, by inhibiting America's capacity to respond to technological change or foreign rivals. Arrighi and Kennedy have almost nothing to say about morals in their analyses, since both view all hegemon's decline as inevitable and the result of structural factors. Kennedy 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). The focus of his moral critique, however, is economic: Kennedy worries that economic decline will lead to demands for higher taxes on the rich and greater social spending that will further sap long-term economic growth (p. 531). Intensifying Kennedy's concern, Ferguson, the Kagans, Boot, and Hanson argue that as long as the American public is unwilling to make long-term investments or sacrifices, the United States will lose geopolitical dominance. Unlike the ancient authors, who posit a direct (but not unidirectional) link between the morals of rulers and subjects and the fate of Rome, modern authors, as we will show in more detail below, see the relationship between individuals' morality and actions and American decline as mediated by multi-step causal processes and/or structural forces.

5.1. *Morals in modern decline narratives*

Modern authors see Americans' primary moral failing as an unwillingness to sacrifice for the common good, although they disagree on the sort of sacrifice they believe is needed and on the causes of that failing. 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. 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, however, suggest a causal relationship between inequality and corruption.

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) and argues that extreme inequality has made the U.S. economy more turbulent, prone to crisis, and less competitive internationally. Mann also points to the weakness of American democracy, specifically elected officials' structural dependence on private firms' monetary

contributions as the cause of “inequality [that] widens to a degree unparalleled anywhere in the world” (2003, p. 100).

Mann and Wallerstein focus more attention on U.S. behavior in the international realm than in the domestic arena. 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, perhaps because American decline is inevitable in his and Arrighi’s world systemic model of hegemonic cycles.

Mann notes, “Like all imperialists, American ones are self-righteous” (2003, p. 100). 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 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 (because that goal is beyond reach), 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 and Hanson, unlike Wallerstein and Mann, believe 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. Hanson finds a continuity of values from the ancient Athenians to the contemporary United States and worries that “in the age of cultural studies, Americans” fail to recognize how different “our enemies” are from us (p. 46) and that the triumph of “Islamic fundamentalists” (p. 47) would extinguish the rights and freedoms he assumes all Americans value. Ferguson asserts that liberal empires improved the material and social conditions of the colonized and that the American informal empires does so as well, but that the U.S. public needs to be convinced of the goodness of its nation’s foreign policy if it is to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain American dominance. Boot and the Kagans say little about the relative moral worth of America and other nations; American world dominance (like that of Britain before it) is assumed to be a worthy goal.

Boot, the Kagans, Hanson and Ferguson all worry that Americans are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain that world dominance. This is by far the most emphatic theme in all four books, although they differ somewhat on the sources and nature of this form of weakness. The Kagans, Boot and Hanson worry most that Americans no longer are willing to sacrifice lives in war, a change the Kagans date to Vietnam and Boot to Desert Storm in 1991. The Kagans and Boot argue that U.S. military commanders responded to public opinion by holding back troops from risky ground warfare, allowing al Qaeda fighters to escape from Tora Bora in Afghanistan (Boot pp. 379–800) and led to what the Kagans see as a premature end to the Gulf War (pp. 254–56). While the Kagans and Boot see casualty aversion as the result of specific previous American wars, Hanson identifies a general softening of life in the “West”: “affluence and security that accrued from capitalism and consensual government often proved a mixed blessing in nasty wars against those who were far poorer, far more used to violence, often far more numerous—and usually had far less to lose. . .” (p. 242).

Ferguson, while criticizing President Clinton for not risking American lives in Bosnia or Iraq, focuses much more on American unwillingness to pay the financial costs of military dominance. His focus on spending sets him apart from Boot and Hanson (who have nothing to say about the military budget), and from the Kagans who argue that the U.S. like Britain before it spends too little on the military, but offer no reason for that perceived shortfall. Ferguson contends that America suffers from a systemic

“attention deficit” (p. 293 and *passim*), stemming from the structure of American politics and the exhausting cycle of elections. Some measure of individual blame is apportioned when he avers 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).

5.2. 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 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 some of the modern authors from the ancients. Whether and how each 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, Ferguson, the Kagans, Hanson and Boot are mainly 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). 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). 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, above all if individuals “pull back from hypercommercialism, unplug from the noisy media a bit, and learn more about and reflect on the current economic situation” (p. 254).

The other modern authors have less to say about social cohesion. Mann mentions the rise in inequality in passing (2003, p. 100; so 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 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.

Hanson, who finds the greatest parallels between ancient Athens and the contemporary West also offers the most voluntaristic view of America’s future among the authors we examine. He notes several structural factors that have reduced America’s military edge over enemies: “The increasing scarcity of oil [gives] terrorists and insurgents [the money to] purchase weapons comparable to those fabricated in America” (p. 244), and the U.S. is undermined by allies who depend on Middle Eastern oil states to whom they also want to sell weapons. At the same time, the U.S. is weakened psychologically because the growing gap in wealth between the U.S. and the Islamic world leaves “our side having so much to lose, while the enemy dreams of an Islamic paradise. . . more enticing than the slums” (p. 230). Hanson argues that none of these structural forces are dispositive if leaders can convince the public to overcome their unrealistic desire for short-term results and recognize that war is “a primitive nasty business” (p. 235), unpredictable, and marked by early reverses. In the tradition of Roman exemplary history, Hanson argues that victory depends on “a Pericles or a Franklin Roosevelt [who] explains. . . how difficult the task is. . . and how we will, as in the past, ensure [the enemy’s] defeat” (p. 234).

Boot focuses almost entirely on “revolutions in military affairs,” technological and strategic innovations that repeatedly disrupted existing hierarchies of power among nations from the sixteenth century to the present, and now allow “super-terrorists. . . to trump U.S. military hegemony” (p. 433). Boot identifies a variety of institutional forces within militaries that facilitate or slow adaptations to innovation, while the Kagans argue that changes in the organization of the U.S. military directly weakened its fighting prowess and empowered Colin Powell to limit risks of casualties.

Mann, Hanson, Boot, Ferguson and the Kagans, unlike Sachs, Kennedy, Arrighi and Wallerstein, doubt that a new hegemon will emerge to challenge the United States and instead focus on the possibility that lesser powers or non-state actors will gain access to weapons that will circumvent America’s current huge military advantage. 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. 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.

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).

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 19th and early 20th 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). The Kagans contend that past U.S. timidity made allies reluctant to support the U.S. and emboldened enemies. 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. 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, and Boot and Hanson argue that under proper leadership American resolve to fight and win wars can be revived.

6. 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. Ancient authors evoke nostalgia for earlier republican Rome, but do not offer sustained comparisons between Rome and other empires or civilizations. Modern authors often evoked the themes *Comparisons to past powers* and *Nostalgia* together. Ancient authors tended to employ nostalgia to buttress their moral judgment: 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, Ferguson and Hanson are the most overtly nostalgic of the authors in our sample—for early Republican Rome, imperial Britain, and both ancient Athens and the United States during World War II, respectively. All three use the earlier cases to illustrate the weaknesses of their current objects of study (late Republican Rome and 21st century America,). All assert decline as a demonstrable reality on the basis of the weaknesses' accumulation over time. They differ, however, in how they develop the nostalgia theme to support their narrative.

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." (*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 (*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 U.S. in past eras. Instead, his book is an extended exercise in nostalgia for imperial Britain: in Ferguson's view it was the British who knew 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 19th and early 20th centuries (on Germany and Japan: pp. 69–83; on the British occupation of Iraq and Egypt compared with America in Iraq: chapter 6).

Hanson is nostalgic for a long tradition, going back to ancient Athens, of men willing to fight and die to preserve Western values. While he believes those values have largely disappeared from civilian life in the United States and, as we saw above, gives a number of reasons why that loss may be permanent, he holds out the unlikely possibility that America could recover its martial fortitude under the right leadership. Sachs is nostalgic for the more recent World War II and Cold War leadership of Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy. While Sachs unconsciously echoes ancient themes 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.

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 5th century AD) unfavorably with that of the 3rd century AD, when even the provinces furthest from Rome were secure (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 existed 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 greatness can be recaptured with the right policies or structural changes. Kennedy, Boot, 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. These authors draw comparisons with past great powers, but do so only to deepen their analysis of structural change. They do not offer proposals to reverse the fall, presumably because they see America's decline as having structural causes and as therefore inevitable. The three sociologists see American dominance as having produced global suffering, and therefore do not regret U.S. military decline, 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.

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-4th 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.

Authors who utilize the theme of nostalgia do so to make negative moral evaluations of their Roman or American contemporaries and in some cases to inspire behavior to reclaim past greatness for the Roman Empire or United States. Those who believe decline is caused by uncontrollable structural forces do not evoke nostalgia. Thus, nostalgia is an emotion and trope that loses salience as structural explanations gain priority.

7. 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.

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, there was reason for optimism. He conceded decline, yes, but cannot 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 or penchant for optimism. Rather, we must consider the broader historical context in which each was situated and the audience each imagined himself to be addressing.

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 incurring the wrath of the ruling powers. Decline, then as now, is an idea with discomfiting potential for public malcontent or demands for reform.

Modern authors bring two principal innovations to the narratives of decline offered by the ancient writers: 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 can account for decline not only in the U.S. but also 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. 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 America's future. 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 decline theorists' mode of reasoning. To the extent that the two modes of explanation for decline contradict and undercut each other, 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 media appearances. Perhaps their broad appeal stems from the ability to combine, if not logically reconcile, analytic and moral messages. Hanson, the Kagans, and Boot give less weight to structural forces than to Americans' loss of resolve and so are able consistently to bemoan American weakness and identify steps leaders or the public could take to reverse decline.

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 (except for Wallerstein and Arrighi and to a lesser extent Mann and Kennedy) 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 unpacking contemporary social narratives and tracing the enduring concerns and problems that underpin them. 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 surprisingly 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 arrangements and their affect on the powerful, and for some authors, on the well-being and harmony of the broader society. 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.

Acknowledgments

We thank Amir Baghdadchi, Robert Jansen, Daniel Kapust, Dan Little, David Potter, and George Steinmetz for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Participants in the Social Theory workshop at the University of Michigan provided insightful feedback that further strengthened the paper. Errors and omissions are solely the authors' responsibility.

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