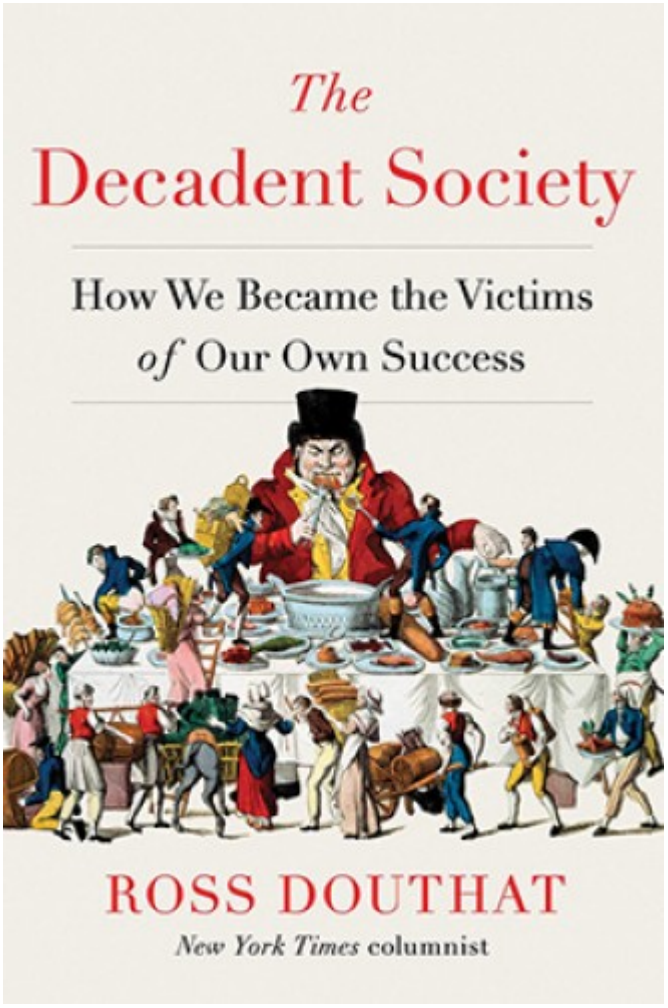
Stuck in an imperial system that has outlived its promise

Ross Douthat wonders what will get us beyond decadence.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the August 12, 2020 issue

In Review



The Decadent Society

How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success

By Ross Douthat
Simon & Schuster

My parents and grandparents watched the Apollo moon landing live. I was born years too late to watch it with them, but I did get to see the 2014 *Mad Men* episode in which the shared experience of watching the moon landing is transmuted into a pitch for a fast-food advertising campaign. Oddly enough, watching that episode helped me empathize with those generations who had seen the world-redefining lunar moment as it happened and whose awe I could participate in only secondhand. My formative experience of space flight, after all, was seeing the *Challenger* disaster live.

Our culture's mastery of mining, adapting, and humanizing a moment like the moon landing is remarkable and perhaps unprecedented. But one thing this mastery does is measure the distance between the moment and the nostalgia for it. We never got beyond the moon—and the ground between here and there, then and now, can only be worked over by narrative art for so long.

Ross Douthat's new book portrays a world that has surrendered exploration, growth, and innovation in exchange for a grim stability. It starts with the Apollo program and narrates the dead ends and disappointments that followed. The result is not a potted culture war story about declining virtue and flourishing vice leading to an imminent collapse of America. It's something more complicated and sorrowful.

We stopped boldly going into space; we slowed our pace of invention; we got old and comfortable and wary. "What fascinates and terrifies us about the Roman Empire is not that it finally went smash," Douthat quotes from a book review by W. H. Auden, but rather that "it managed to last for four centuries without creativity, warmth, or hope." That civilizations rise and fall has not been news since the tower of Babel. That they might cease to rise and yet hang indefinitely in midair before falling is a possibility more seductive and horrifying. This is what Douthat calls *decadence*, a malaise deeper than any of our economic, political, or cultural conflicts and disappointments.

Douthat defines *decadence* as "*economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development*." It is, in his account, a nearly global phenomenon, endemic in the ways our financial and political systems operate, our culture

industries make their products, and our habits of social and family life are evolving.

His argument stands on four major claims: economic growth and technological advancement have slowed to persistently disappointing rates (*stagnation*); birth rates are falling worldwide, with societies aging rapidly and experiencing heightened loneliness and alienation as a result (*sterility*); governments are succumbing to chronic gridlock and dysfunction (*sclerosis*); and culture is consolidating toward endless repackaging and recycling of itself (*repetition*).

This state of affairs is potentially stable and durable. While our absorption in social media and virtual reality may seem to be driving political radicalism, in fact it "manages the political passions, not by fomenting real revolution but by encouraging people to play-act extremism, to reenact the 1930s or 1968 on social media." At the same time, new technologies of surveillance and soft repression are being developed around the world to hedge in behavior and dissent. The illiberal or postliberal democracies in Poland and Hungary don't offer a true alternative to decadence so much as "a more ethnocentric way to experience sclerosis." No ideological or religious challenges to hegemonic decadence seem to be capable of winning converts. The result is "zones of chaos and disorder that don't really threaten the metropole, and no nation or civilization charting a radically different course."

Douthat's portrait draws on both hard numbers and broad impressions. Claims about economic growth, birth rates, and the aging of populations can be established with clear data. "Exhaustion" and "repetition" are harder to define and identify. Douthat does not attempt to data-mine the vast archives of culture for patterns or trends that could yield a "decadence index" across times and places. If *decadence* has a useful analytical life beyond an essay like Douthat's, it will have to be defined more rigorously and sought for more deeply than he does.

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Nevertheless, the menagerie of data Douthat does assemble goes both with and against the grain of enough different partisan and ideological positions that it should provoke consideration from a broad range of readers. Douthat has taken advantage of his unique position in the media ecosystem to attempt the rare feat, for a columnist, of being interesting.

A devoted cultural and religious conservative who writes for the *New York Times*, Douthat is also a Never Trump Republican who is (unlike most of that faction) neither a neocon nor a libertarian. He has no team to play for and no choice but to speak to people on other teams. More than most people in his trade, he states the strong case for views he doesn't hold and acknowledges the real problems or goals those views are addressing.

Nowhere is this sensibility more on display than in the book's central chapter, "Giving Decadence Its Due." While he has painted a comprehensively grim picture of the modern world along technological, economic, political, and cultural lines, Douthat acknowledges that there are worse fates than being sunk in an imperial system that has outlived all its promise. People "can still live vigorously amid a general stagnation, be fruitful amid sterility, be creative amid repetition, and build good and fully human lives that offer, in microcosm, a counterpoint and challenge to the decadent macrocosm."

Our reluctance to leave an unhappy equilibrium may not be assuaged by the following chapters on "the deaths of decadence." Perhaps there will be a civilization-scaled catastrophe at the connection of economic crisis, climate disaster, and mass migration that is somewhat analogous to Rome "going smash" after four hopeless and uncreative centuries. Douthat imagines corporate entities that survive the decay of nation-states as the institutions that, like the medieval church, provide order and stability through the disaster.

But it's also possible, he writes, that there will be a renaissance of some kind—a great technological leap forward that abolishes the need for work or the limits on human life, a socialist- or nationalist-led return to dynamism, or a religious revival in pagan or Christian form.

There is a disconcerting asymmetry in these passages. The grim scenarios require only that we extrapolate from trends and phenomena already visible, while the happier exits from decadence rely on spontaneous and unpredictable developments.

And so the book ends with an enigmatic and expansive chapter on providence, which imagines some truly external shock to our current system. Douthat dwells on the deep-space object 'Oumuamua, spotted in 2017 and observed accelerating through our solar system, prompting a speculative explanation that it is some kind of spacecraft or probe sent from an alien civilization. He also mentions the navy

fighter encounters with puzzling airborne objects, in one case captured on video, in 2004 and 2015, which the Pentagon recently declassified.

Moments like ours, Douthat suggests, when a civilization seems to have reached a limit beyond which it can't see and at which it can't sustain itself, are times when providence seems to intervene. It is a moment at which arguments end and speculation takes over. Whatever event the author or reader might imagine would, by definition, break out of the categories we've established (by historically short but culturally firm consensus) for understanding history.

What looks like decadence to Douthat is a golden age for a tiny slice of the world.

There are flaws in Douthat's somber and grandiose architecture of decadence. To a much greater extent than most conservative writers, he stresses the dangers of monopolies, the tendencies of the extremely wealthy toward "hoarding cash in mattresses" or creating ludicrous (or merely fraudulent) start-ups, and the unaccountable power of corporations. But he does not take that insight far enough.

Sclerotic institutions may not be good for advancing significant, transformative legislation. They are highly responsive, however, to the demands of wealthy corporations and individuals who want a greater share of the fiscal pie or greater use of the environmental commons for dumping their emissions. (Douthat's account of polarization and gridlock makes no mention of inequality, gerrymandering, or the Electoral College.) Financial fraud and start-up make-believe are enabled by inadequate laws and by elite impunity for white-collar crime. Even the dreary cycle of superhero film franchises and comically derivative *Star Wars* sequels reflects the demands of a highly consolidated entertainment industry and a strangling regime of intellectual property law that almost ensures nothing interesting or creative can be made while it's still possible to churn out easy hits using paid-for properties.

In other words, what looks like decadence to Douthat is a golden age for a tiny but enormously powerful slice of the world, and the lingering dynamism within these systems is being put to use ensuring that it keeps working for that constituency. One simple way to define decadence is a condition of society in which the economic elite have so far escaped the median that they have no productive ways to spend their money and no plausible fear of losing their power. A little redistribution (or perhaps a lot) might unplug a lot of technological and political bottlenecks.

Still, from his place in the political wilderness, Douthat is right to puncture the ego gratifications of our immediate crises and our short-term electoral and cultural battles. A Biden presidency would be different in many ways from the current administration, but no one bothers to claim that it would fundamentally alter our trajectory toward an aging, unsustainable, radically unequal future. The UFO examples are useful to Douthat's argument, in the end, because they have no ideological implications.

The drift of history (let alone whatever is beyond it) does not respond to election results, Instagram influence, IPOs, or groundbreaking gains in superhero movie representation. We may not get an extraterrestrial encounter or an act of God to yank us out of our slow downward spiral, but it's possible that's exactly what we need. Maybe, Douthat speculates, our embrace of simulation, sterility, repetition, and the sense of futility is

> connected on a deep level to the post-Apollo mission sense that . . . there is quite literally nowhere else for mankind to go, that we are stuck here waiting to either destroy ourselves accidentally or to have nature hit reboot, via comet or a plague, on our entire up-from-hunter-gathering, east-of-Eden project.

Douthat ends on a poignant, if underdeveloped, double prescription: more space exploration and more piety.

Whether by the void of chance or the design of providence, this book came out just as the new coronavirus was starting its sweep through Europe and the United States, and three months before the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police sparked the largest mass movement in recent American history. Decadence was suddenly undeniable. It was staring at us from the face of a national failure of governance. Money for coronavirus testing and small-business payrolls went unspent; unaccountable and sclerotic state power reasserted itself with tear gas and rubber bullets. But at the same time, there was a spontaneous, leaderless street movement that eclipsed online playacting. There were stalled bills for cosmetic reform and dramatic pushes for new policy experiments.

It suddenly turned out that however decadent we may be, we have numerous frontiers to conquer without taking any more steps beyond our planet's gravity. Our mechanisms for cooperation—government most obviously, but markets and

corporations too—are clearly not optimized even to maintain our condition of stasis. Our commitments to and practices of solidarity are weak. Our ability to articulate what a good and healthy society would look like is desperately withered. But our own society's most torpid failures have been countered by a grassroots energy suggesting that we are not resigned to decadence yet.

We may never really get the chance to know, but Hannah Arendt may have been right that the human condition is inextricably bound to the earth. While we are here we are human, and while we are human we are dependent on creativity, warmth, and hope—not just to thrive but to endure. Douthat is right, and timely, to find hope not in the consolidation of the goods of the present age nor in the glories of the past but on the far side of our culture's entirely rational flirtation with despair. The task of reaching that far side can't wait any longer.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Hitting a limit."