ON THE SECRET OF DEGENERATION

by Baron Julius Evola

Anyone who has come to reject the rationalist myth of "progress" and the

interpretation of history as an unbroken positive development of mankind

will find himself gradually drawn towards the world-view that was common to

all the great traditional cultures, and which had at its centre the memory

of a process of degeneration, slow obscuration, or collapse of a higher

preceding world. As we penetrate deeper into this new (and old)

interpretation, we encounter various problems, foremost among which is the

question of the secret of degeneration.

In its literal sense, this question is by no means a novel one. While

contemplating the magnificent remains of cultures whose very name has not

even come down to us, but which seem to have conveyed, even in their

physical material, a greatness and power that is more than earthly, scarcely

anyone has failed to ask themselves questions about the death of cultures,

and sensed the inadequacy of the reasons that are usually given to explain

it.

We can thank the Comte de Gobineau for the best and best-known summary of

this problem, and also for a masterly criticism of the main hypotheses about

it. His solution on the basis of racial thought and racial purity also has a

lot of truth in it, but it needs to be expanded by a few observations

concerning a higher order of things. For there have been many cases in which

a culture has collapsed even when its race has remained pure, as is

especially clear in certain groups that have suffered slow, inexorable

extinction despite remaining as racially isolated as if they were islands.

An example quite close at hand is the case of the Swedes and the Dutch.

These people are in the same racial condition today as they were two

centuries ago, but there is little to be found now of the heroic disposition

and the racial awareness that they once possessed. Other great cultures seem

merely to have remained standing in the condition of mummies: they have long

been inwardly dead, so that it takes only the slightest push to knock them

down. This was the case, for example, with ancient Peru, that giant solar

empire which was annihilated by a few adventurers drawn from the worst

rabble of Europe.

If we look at the secret of degeneration from the exclusively traditional

point of view, it becomes even harder to solve it completely. It is then a

matter of the division of all cultures into two main types. On the one hand

there are the traditional cultures, whose principle is identical and

unchangeable, despite all the differences evident on the surface. The axis

of these cultures and the summit of their hierarchical order consists of

metaphysical, supra-individual powers and actions, which serve to inform and

justify everything that is merely human, temporal, subject to becoming and

to "history." On the other hand there is "modern culture," which is actually

the anti-tradition and which exhausts itself in a construction of purely

human and earthly conditions and in the total development of these, in

pursuit of a life entirely detached from the "higher world."

From the standpoint of the latter, the whole of history is degeneration,

because it shows the universal decline of earlier cultures of the

traditional type, and the decisive and violent rise of a new universal

civilization of the "modern" type.

A double question arises from this.

First, how was it ever possible for this to come to pass? There is a logical

error underlying the whole doctrine of evolution: it is impossible that the

higher can emerge from the lower, and the greater from the less. But doesn't

a similar difficulty face us in the solution of the doctrine of involution?

How is it ever possible for the higher to fall? If we could make do with

simple analogies, it would be easy to deal with this question. A healthy man

can become sick; a virtuous one can turn to vice. There is a natural law

that everyone takes from granted: that every living being starts with birth,

growth, and strength, then come old age, weakening, and disintegration. And

so forth. But this is just making statements, not explaining, even if we

allow that such analogies actually relate to the question posed here.

Secondly, it is not only a matter of explaining the possibility of the

degeneration of a particular cultural world, but also the possibility that

the degeneration of one cultural cycle may pass to other peoples and take

them down with it. For example, we have not only to explain how the ancient

Western reality collapsed, but also have to show the reason why it was

possible for "modern" culture to conquer practically the whole world, and

why it possessed the power to divert so many peoples from any other type of

culture, and to hold sway even where states of a traditional kind seemed to

be alive (one need only recall the Aryan East).

In this respect, it is not enough to say that we are dealing with a purely

material and economic conquest. That view seems very superficial, for two

reasons. In the first place, a land that is conquered on the material level

also experiences, in the long run, influences of a higher kind corresponding

to the cultural type of its conqueror. We can state, in fact, that European

conquest almost everywhere sows the seeds of "Europeanization," i.e., the

"modern" rationalist, tradition-hostile, individualistic way of thinking.

Secondly, the traditional conception of culture and the state is

hierarchical, not dualistic. Its bearers could never subscribe, without

severe reservations, to the principles of "Render unto Caesar the things

that are Caesar's" and "My kingdom is not of this world." For us,

"Tradition" is the victorious and creative presence in the world of that

which is "not of this world," i.e., of the Spirit, understood as a power

that is mightier than any merely human or material one.

This is a basic idea of the authentically traditional view of life, which

does not permit us to speak with contempt of merely material conquests. On

the contrary, the material conquest is the sign, if not of a spiritual

victory, at least of a spiritual weakness or a kind of spiritual "retreat"

in the cultures that are conquered and lose their independence. Everywhere

that the Spirit, regarded as the stronger power, was truly present, it never

lacked for means - visible or otherwise - to enable all the opponent's

technical and material superiority to be resisted. But this has not

happened. It must be concluded, then, that degeneracy was lurking behind the

traditional facade of every people that the "modern" world has been able to

conquer. The West must then have been the culture in which a crisis that was

already universal assumed its acutest form. There the degeneration amounted,

so to speak, to a knockout blow, and as it took effect, it brought down with

more or less ease other peoples in whom the involution had certainly not

"progressed" as far, but whose tradition had already lost its original

power, so that these peoples were no longer able to protect themselves from

an outside assault.

With these considerations, the second aspect of our problem is traced back

to the first one. It is mainly a question of explicating the meaning and the

possibility of degeneracy, without reference to other circumstances.

For this we must be clear about one thing: it is an error to assume that the

hierarchy of the traditional world is based on a tyranny of the upper

classes. That is merely a "modern" conception, completely alien to the

traditional way of thinking. The traditional doctrine in fact conceived of

spiritual action as an "action without acting"; it spoke of the "unmoved

mover"; everywhere it used the symbolism of the "pole," the unalterable axis

around which every ordered movement takes place (and elsewhere we have shown

that this is the meaning of the swastika, the "arctic cross"); it always

stressed the "Olympian," spirituality, and genuine authority, as well as its

way of acting directly on its subordinates, not through violence but through

"presence"; finally, it used the simile of the magnet, wherein lies the key

to our question, as we shall now see.

Only today could anyone imagine that the authentic bearers of the Spirit, or

of Tradition, pursue people so as to seize them and put them in their places

- in short, that they "manage" people, or have any personal interest in

setting up and maintaining those hierarchical relationships by virtue of

which they can appear visibly as the rulers. This would be ridiculous and

senseless. It is much more the recognition on the part of the lower ones

that is the true basis of any traditional ranking. It is not the higher that

needs the lower, but the other way round. The essence of hierarchy is that

there is something living as a reality in certain people, which in the rest

is only present in the condition of an ideal, a premonition, an unfocused

effort. Thus the latter are fatefully attracted to the former, and their

lower condition is one of subordination less to something foreign, than to

their own true "self." Herein lies the secret, in the traditional world, of

all readiness for sacrifice, all heroism, all loyalty; and, on the other

side, of a prestige, an authority, and a calm power which the most

heavily-armed tyrant can never count upon.

With these considerations, we have come very close to solving not only the

problem of degeneration, but also the possibility of a particular fall. Are

we perhaps not tired of hearing that the success of every revolution

indicates the weakness and degeneracy of the previous rulers? An

understanding of this kind is very one-sided. This would indeed be the case

if wild dogs were tied up, and suddenly broke loose: that would be proof

that the hands holding their leashes had become impotent or weak. But things

are arranged very differently in the framework of spiritual ranking, whose

real basis we have explained above. This hierarchy degenerates and is able

to be overthrown in one case only: when the individual degenerates, when he

uses his fundamental freedom to deny the Spirit, to cut his life loose from

any higher reference-point, and to exist "only for himself." Then the

contacts are fatefully broken, the metaphysical tension, to which the

traditional organism owes its unity, gives way, every force wavers in its

path and finally breaks free. The peaks, of course, remain pure and

inviolable in their heights, but the rest, which depended on them, now

becomes an avalanche, a mass that has lost its equilibrium and falls, at

first imperceptibly but with ever accelerating movement down to the depths

and lowest levels of the valley. This is the secret of every degeneration

and revolution. The European had first slain the hierarchy in himself by

extirpating his own inner possibilities, to which corresponded the basis of

the order that he would then destroy externally.

If Christian mythology attributes the Fall of Man and the Rebellion of the

Angels to the freedom of the will, then it comes to much the same

significance. It concerns the frightening potential that dwells in man of

using freedom to destroy spiritually and to banish everything that could

ensure him a supra-natural value. This is a metaphysical decision: the

stream that traverses history in the most varied forms of the

traditional-hating, revolutionary, individualistic, and humanistic spirit,

or in short, the "modern" spirit. This decision is the only positive and

decisive cause in the secret of degeneration, the destruction of Tradition.

If we understand this, we can perhaps also grasp the sense of those legends

that speak of mysterious rulers who "always" exist and have never died

(shades of the Emperor sleeping beneath the Kyffhäuser mountain!). Such

rulers can be rediscovered only when one achieves spiritual completeness and

awakens a quality in oneself like that of a metal that suddenly feels "the

magnet", finds the magnet and irresistibly orients itself and moves towards

it. For now, we must restrict ourselves to this hint. A comprehensive

explanation of legends of that sort, which come to us from the most ancient

Aryan source, would take us too far. At another opportunity we will perhaps

return to the secret of reconstruction, to the "magic" that is capable of

restoring the fallen mass to the unalterable, lonely, and invisible peaks

that are still there in the heights.