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David Weir. *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of David Weir. *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2018. 132 pp.

Keywords

decadence, modernity

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In *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, David Weir helps students, scholars, and the general public to think more critically about decadence by introducing a lens that could serve as a starting point for understanding the concept: modernity and conflict. Decadence, he argues, emerges in response to modernity and, despite its heterogeneity, is always an expression or a projection of a conflicted attitude towards modernity. Although Weir defines modernity as the totality of practices and progresses that reshaped the social fabric in nineteenth-century Europe, he nonetheless sees urban innovations as its distinctive feature. Thus, he develops a city-oriented perspective in order to emphasize that decadence must always be understood as a particularized urban experience, and he looks to antiquity, and specifically Rome, as places where decadence emerged.

With this focus, he lays the premise on which his text is structured. For Weir, the expansion of urban agglomerations across Europe during the nineteenth century prompted two main reactions. Whereas proponents of modernity regarded the new innovations and arrangements of public and private urban spaces as progress, many others experienced increasing difficulties in understanding their new agglomeration. They rejected its accelerated pace (*cadence* in French) of life as an “up-tempo cadence of daily life [and] de - cadence” (4). Hence, they made their disenchantment with modernity explicit in various ways. Decadence is, then, the aesthetic expression of this conflicted attitude towards modernity through time and across various urban spaces. The author insists on the versatility of the concept by contending that decadence took various forms depending on the time and the city where it developed, so much so that one may not expect to find every aspect of decadence in one city or in the work of one decadent artist. This theoretical direction leads him to examine five urban spaces during different historical periods and to identify four developmental trends of decadence: classical, cultural, social, and socio-cultural.

Chapter 1 posits classical decadence of ancient Rome as the core model that set the norms of the genre. Using a comparative approach with ample attention to details, Weir roots the birth of decadence in this context, arguing that classical decadence emerges with two variants—social and cultural—from the original works of some ancient Roman and Greek authors and biographers. In its social dimension, classical decadence refers to the literature of some ancient writers in which accuracy was not the goal. Instead, their texts denigrated some past emperors and leaders by over-emphasizing their “shameful dissolutions” (17). The implication is that such antisocial behavior was deviant in comparison to their virtuous ancestors and led to the decline of these empires. In its cultural variance, classical decadence specifies the literary strategies in these texts, which incorporated various aesthetical innovations that contrasted sharply with the

classical model of literature. Therefore, they were outlawed as unconventional. In Weir's formulation, these two components are the model that nineteenth-century writers emulate. The following chapters give a comprehensive picture of their captivating story in four main cities: Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin.

Weir shows that decadence in the aforementioned cities shares some common characteristics with classical decadence, even while it is expressed differently due in large part to two forces: time and the transition to modernity. These two forces are the filters that determine the coloration of decadence in each city and allow Weir to problematize the idea that decadence follows a strict chronology. First, he presents Paris during the 1880s where decadence takes a cultural turn due to the violent and traumatic character of Paris's urban renovation. The architects in charge of transforming Paris opted to erase much of the complex network of old medieval neighborhoods that constituted the city at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Writers who experienced this violent transition firsthand expressed their skepticism in a subversive literature that focused on the downside of progress and embodied a delectation of social decay.

In contrast to Paris, where medievalism and modernity were in conflict, British architects "re-imagined" London by choosing medievalism as their inspiration. By doing so, the transition of London into a modern agglomeration marked a continuity between the old medieval London and the new city. In fact, British proponents of modernity believed that Gothic art harmonized "perfectly" with the Christian moralism of their time. This harmonizing vision of art and aesthetics, nonetheless, becomes an object of criticism for writers in London, who reject it as limiting and advocate instead for an "outbreak of the human spirit" (60). Therefore, the decadence that emerges in London during the 1890s becomes a social expression. Unlike Paris, where the movement is confined to cultural productions, the decadence of London is expressed through literature and the lives of writers that stood at odds with the institutional culture of their time. They were often imprisoned on charges related to their "depravity."

This social trend is at its peak in Vienna and Berlin, where decadence takes a sociocultural turn, due to the massive increase in participation levels that occurred in these two cities. Whereas in Paris and London decadence is confined to a small elite, in Vienna and Berlin, it finds a larger middle-class audience, so much so that it becomes a mass movement involving hundreds of thousands of people from all social strata. Decadents in these cities eagerly participate in all kinds of social behavior and cultural acts that challenge the bourgeois norms of 1900s prewar Vienna and 1920s Weimar Berlin. Again, for Weir, this shift is to be understood in connection with the dynamics in urban restructuring of these two cities. Whereas architects in Vienna chose to enclose the old medieval town, in Berlin they integrated it. Yet, the result was very similar: the new dynamics in both cities brought together all sectors of society and fostered a greater flow of people and

ideas. Weir ends his well-researched analysis with an afterword discussing the legacies of decadence today, again using the theoretical lens he proposes to his readership: to approach decadence as a city-specific critique of progress.

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